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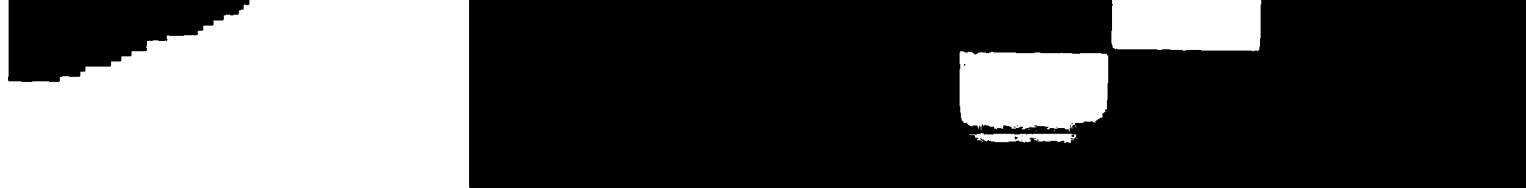
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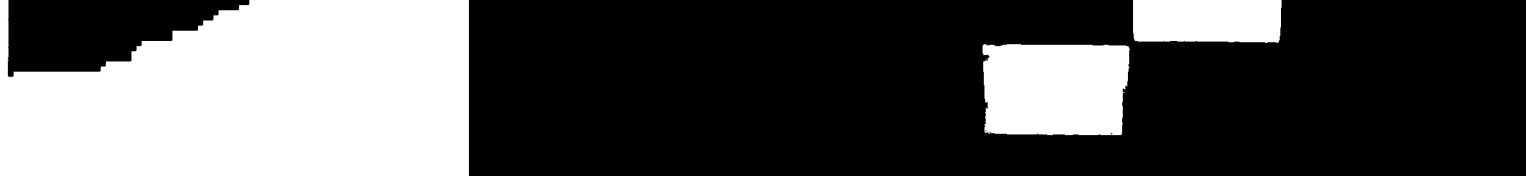


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MONSIEUR MARTIN

A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT SWEDISH WAR

BY

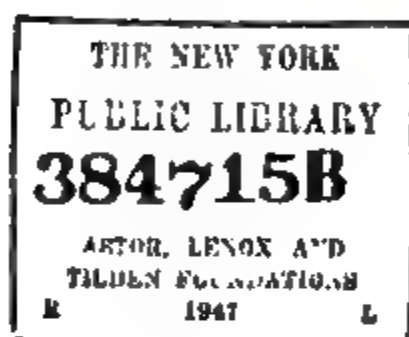
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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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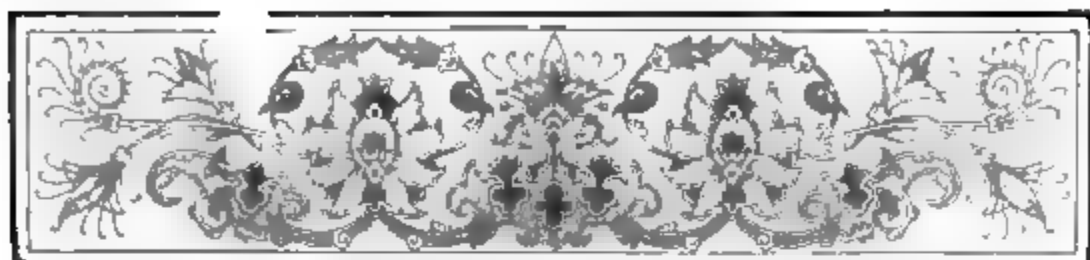


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MONSIEUR MARTIN



1




MONSIEUR MARTIN

PART I

THE SECRET OF KING ERIC'S TOWER

CHAPTER I

THE LAST AND ALSO THE FIRST LESSON

“**T**HERE is no action of man in this life that is not the beginning of so long a chain of consequences, as no human providence is high enough to give a man a prospect to the end.”

What a merciless thought it is ! one of the most merciless in the wicked and merciless philosophy expounded in *The Leviathan* of my countryman, Mr. Thomas Hobbes. Angrily I threw the volume into a corner of the room.

The library in Polenstjerna Castle in Sweden, in which I sat waiting on this glorious August day in the year of grace sixteen hundred and ninety-nine, was an apartment very dear to my heart, and a right pleasant one you would have pronounced it at that moment, as the summer sun burnished the faded portraits and the solemn rows of stately folios whose dust no one ever stirred save myself. My Lady, as in my

2 The Last and also the First Lesson

English way I called my noble pupil and mistress, the Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna, was late for her lesson as usual. On any other morning than this I should not have given the hour a thought. But to-day that was impossible ; Plato and Mr. Hobbes had made me fretful and melancholy. For was I not, alas ! after two years of happy duty, was I not leaving Polenstjerna ? The chanting of a song broke my musings, the chanting of a girl singing softly and clearly :

“ What bluid ’s that on thy coat lap,
Son Davie, son Davie ?
What bluid ’s that on thy coat lap ?
And the truth come tell to me.”

Perhaps you may have heard the song, and Greta, my Lady’s waiting-wench, was blithely carolling it now in its Swedish words and tune, which begin :

*“Hvar har du varit så länge
Du Sven i Rosengård ?”*

And I would have you know that these quaint ballads, of which, like the country wenches in my own land, she had an endless store, are full as grim as the ballads that you will so strangely hear in the gloaming in England, crooned by happy maids milking the cows or fetching water from the village pump.

I stepped on to the Terrace. What a morning it was ! And of all the fair and noble prospects to delight a man’s eye this from the Terrace, the pride of Polenstjerna, was surely the fairest and noblest. Walk with me to the stone balustrade to our left on which the roses climbed in their summer glory, and see ! yonder you can catch a glimpse of the blue Baltic and feel the salt air blowing so fresh and strong from the east. Turn again and down there at your feet stretch the gardens, entrancing as the gardens in a fairy romance,—gardens where I had dreamed through so many

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drowsy afternoons, lulled by the splash of the fountains and the tireless cries of the seamews wheeling round the weather-beaten towers. Ah ! yes, Polenstjerna had been to a poor parentless scholar for two years a haven indeed.

And now, as I stood blinking in the sun at the statues flashing out among the shady walks so cunningly planted by the famous Frenchman who at my Lord's bidding had made Polenstjerna a fit home for goddesses, it was not the blue Baltic nor the castle and its sea-girt pastures importunately wooed by the salt wind, that held me a willing prisoner. Fie on it ! Was it not absolutely pitiful that the heart of Hugh Martin, yeoman born, though he had the good fortune to be a Master of Arts in the most honourable University of Cambridge, should ache because he, the tutor, must say good-bye to the Countess Polenstjerna ! Monsieur Martin, as they called him here, was yeoman born, and his pupil was mistress of Polenstjerna, daughter of one of the most trusted councillors of his late Majesty, King Charles XI, and sprung of a line whose achievements filled Sweden, and Europe too, with their haughty fame. Was it not then with good reason that I called myself a fool—a poor fool ?

Pshaw ! I took my book and strove to read.

“ Good morning, Monsieur Tutor.” In the window stood the young Countess, a posy of roses in her hand, and another posy amid the ribbons on her bodice.

“ Good morning,” she repeated, curtseying demurely, as who should know she had an art in curtseying the most enchanting imaginable. And, if you have patience, you will hear how I have seen some famous ladies.

“ So,” she said, shaking the dew off the roses, “ this is to be our last lesson. You really are leaving ? ”

“ I fear so.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. “ If it is the last lesson,” she said, “ I may choose the subject,” and she dimpled into a laugh. “ It is a lady's privilege.”

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“ It is a tutor’s privilege to obey, Countess.”

“ That is handsome of you, M. Martin. Greta has already decided that we must learn on the Terrace to-day. And it would be a shame to have the last lesson anywhere else.”

For Mr. Locke and his philosophy my pupil cared not at all, but she had always thought more kindly of his heresies since the day when she discovered that he would have the fresh air part of every education, as you may read in his incomparable treatise. Many an hour had I taught in the gardens, still oftener on the Terrace, sometimes even when the snow lay thick and the icicles draped the gods and goddesses at our feet.

You would know what the Countess Ebba was like, but I can only tell you what I saw when I was first ushered into her presence,—I, the raw student, packed off suddenly from The Hague by my Lord her father (he was there, as all the world is aware, to help in making peace between the King of France and my own sovereign of England and his allies, the princes of Europe), I, the bookworm, who in a brief moment became aware that one young lady of quality may differ from another. The Countess Ebba, then, was tall ; indeed, she looked taller than she really was by reason of the proud erectness of her figure. Her features were of a noble clearness, softened by a certain grace, as if the daintiness of the mind within would fain soften the inextinguishable pride which she inherited from her mighty ancestors. But what struck me dumb on that memorable day was not her great blue eyes which met the gaze of man and woman alike with a most wonderful and fearless innocence, eyes pure, fresh, and deep as the Baltic Sea that girdled her castle. No, it was the wealth of golden hair rippling round her forehead, and the astonishingly tender brilliance of her skin, which recalled the tints of the rising sun on the virgin snow of some far-off mountain peak. Ah! if you have never been in Sweden you will not understand how marvellous these two gifts of God, golden hair and a fair complexion, can be.

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Even at Stockholm, at the Court, where they tell me beautiful skins are as common as apples in the autumn, my Lady had amazed and delighted those who had revelled at the balls and masquerades given in honour of his Majesty's cousin, the Duke of Schleswig-Holstein.

"Do you return to England?" my pupil inquired with gracious interest.

"Yes," I said, doggedly, "I return to England."

"You are glad?"

"Glad and sorry—more sorry, I think, than glad."

"Why, how can that be?" Her eyes opened in sincere surprise. "*Mon Dieu!* If I had not seen my country for two years I should be broken-hearted."

"The Grefvinna Polenstjerna," I murmured to the roses, "is not M. Martin."

"No," she interposed regretfully, "she is not a man, more 's the pity." She leaned her cheek on her hand and I knew she was musing of those grim corseleted ancestors who had been proper men. "And what will you do in England?" she asked slowly.

"I hope to study."

"Study?" she interrupted; "is that the best thing that a man can do to-day?"

"It is the best that some men can do," I urged in all earnestness.

"I wonder," she murmured questioningly to the sunny Baltic, "I wonder,—"

Suddenly she faced me. "Faith! if I were a man I would not study. I would do something great." In her eyes flashed the fire that always lay behind the passionless gaze of my Lord Bengt, and, unless the picture lied, he inherited it from the most famous of the Polenstjernas, the Field Marshal of his ever memorable Majesty Gustavus Adolphus.

"That," I said, not without bitterness, "would be easy for M. Martin, who has little money and no friends!"

"A woman," she was saying to the sea, "stays at home,

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reads French, and learns to dance and to spin. But a man ! There is nothing, surely, that a man cannot do."

"Pray, Countess," I asked, "how does a man who is a tutor become great?"

"How?" For answer her arm made a daring sweep. "Out there beyond the sea," she said, "lies the world; there are men and women in it to be won for friends or beaten as foes; there is fame and glory; there is fighting—" and her eyes sparkled as a sword-blade in the sunbeams.

"A tutor does not fight," I protested with grim sincerity.

"No," she replied quickly, "a tutor does not fight. But has M. Martin no other ambition than to remain a tutor?"

M. Martin, poor fool, had other ambitions, but they were not such as he could lay bare at that moment.

"Do not," my Lady said softly, "do not think I am ungrateful; but here in Polenstjerna we *know* that M. Martin is fit for better things than to teach even the Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna"—she laughed gaily—"Latin and French. Such tasks can be left to the women and the men who have not strong arms and stout hearts."

"But my arms are not strong, nor is my heart stout," and God knows it was the truth.

"You have never tried. I am sure"—she began eagerly and checked herself—"Listen. Long, long ago there was a poor and friendless young man alone in the world, but he took his sword and fought for Sweden under Gustavus Vasa, and he began the building of Polenstjerna. His sons took their swords and fought too, and we to-day are grateful for their example."

"Ah! yes," I murmured; "but they were born noble."

"They were." She was not aware that she had thrown her head back.

"And," I hastened to explain, "they lived in stirring times. They fought, as my Lord your father fought, for God, the Protestant Cause, and Sweden."

Unconsciously I had repeated the motto of her race—

The Last and also the First Lesson 7

“*Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !*” the words which, above all, arrest the eye as you ride in over the moat, carved in rude antique letters above the door of the barbican.

“B. P.” they run (Bengt Polenstjerna, that early ancestor who turned to the Reformed Faith with Gustavus Vasa), “B. P. Fecit. 1543. *Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !*”—a glorious motto, gloriously maintained.

“Are you so sure,” my Lady asked in a low voice, “that there will not be stirring times for you and me ?”

Our eyes wandered to the gardens sleeping in the morning sun. Mingled with the cooling plash of the fountains we could hear the silvery lapping of the wavelets playing at breaking on the rocks whence the copper-domed towers above us bade defiance to the east. Here, indeed, all was peace, but even a tutor knew that beyond the blissful rest of these enchanted gardens might be heard strange mutterings. Sweden had lost the iron hand of King Charles XI., who after much blood and tribulation had given his kingdom repose. A motherless lad sat on his father’s throne, and men feared what sort of king he would be. There were factions at Court; the nobles were fretting, many openly discontented, and scarcity, almost famine, pressed on the people.

“We have peace now, thank God !” my Lady went on, in the same low voice, “but when I was last at Stockholm, my cousin Bengt told me that storms were coming, coming fast.”

“Storms ! Countess, whence — whence ?”

“You are aware that there is serious trouble in Schleswig-Holstein. The Duke,” she frowned, for the nobles did not love this duke, “the Duke is his Majesty’s first cousin and dearest friend, the Duchess is his Majesty’s sister, and the Danes”—her figure stiffened—“are becoming insolent. My cousin Bengt says that his Majesty will do as his father did, if need be.”

“What ! will there be war ?”

“God forbid ! But his Majesty has given his word to his cousin. Men do not talk of such affairs to women, yet who

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can say what is brewing in the King's mind? Ah! M. Martin, you may yet have to fight for the Protestant Faith and England."

I shook my head. There had been a great war; it was ended. In my own land King William sat firmly on his throne. There would be no more great wars, for the nations were exhausted.

"Even if stirring times do not come of themselves," she said, smiling at my obstinacy, "a man can always make them. Have you forgotten your Cromwell, of whom you are so proud? I do not like such cruel enemies to kings, but he made stirring times, for he was a man."

"And you have often told me," I replied, smiling too, "that Queen Christina thought so likewise."

"Ah! yes, poor queen! and she knew a man. Was she not the daughter of the Great Gustavus?" Pity changed to scorn, scorn for a daughter who had abjured the faith of her fathers, scorn for a queen who had deserted her kingdom, Sweden. "I almost think," she added suddenly, "that my cousin Bengt is like your Cromwell."

"Will my Lord Bengt," I asked quickly, "cut off his king's head?"

"No, no," and her tone was grave; "we have done with revolutions and conspiracies in Sweden. Our nobles are loyal to their king. I simply meant that my cousin Bengt is a Polenstjerna, and our men must be great. They owe it as a duty to themselves and their country."

"Yes," I murmured heedlessly, "I must return to England."

"Must?" My Lady pursed up her mouth. "Must? why must? I do not believe it is the books. I fancy,"—she shook her finger at me,—"yes, there is some English girl——"

"No, no," I protested with such passionate emphasis that Greta stopped spinning in alarm. "A student does not busy himself with such thoughts."

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“ Oh, fie ! Monsieur Tutor, that is not very polite.”

My Lady pushed back the ringlets that the wind was caressing. “ A man,” she pronounced with exquisite gravity, “ can win any woman if he choose.”

Ah ! I had never taught her that. Such ideas come from preferring the interminable romances of Mademoiselle Scudéry to the philosophy of Mr. Locke.

“ I do not find *that*,” I thought it right to assert, “ in my books.”

My pupil laughed merrily. “ The women in your books,” she said, “ are women described by men who live in books ; they are either wicked or have no spirit.”

“ Madam ! ” I exclaimed, “ is that quite polite ? ”

“ Yes, because M. Martin is not going to live in books. He—” What he, poor thing, was to do was never uttered, for suddenly the porter’s horn rang out. “ What is that ? ” cried my Lady ; “ someone has arrived. It is surely my cousin Bengt. Greta, run and see. Quick, child, quick ! ” Greta speedily tripped back. It was not the Herr Grefve Bengt, she said, in breathless awe, but a Herr Graf from Germany and the Fru Grefvinna begged her niece, the Fröken Grefvinna, to wait upon her at once in the hall.

“ *Mon Dieu !* ” exclaimed my Lady ; “ a Herr Graf from Germany ! You shall come with me, M. Martin ; there will be something for us both to hear. Think you,” she inquired, in demure discontent, “ the Herr Graf will be satisfied that the mistress of Polenstjerna is becomingly attired ? ”

The Countess Ebba was always fit to receive a king, and I ventured to say so.

She laughed. “ If you only knew one robe from another as well as you know your books, Monsieur Tutor, I might be comforted.”

And yet, bookworm as I was, I could have told her what she had worn every day since I had been in her service. Moreover, if the Herr Graf were of the same stuff as other gentlemen of quality he would have no desire to quarrel with

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the colour of her robe, the lacing of her bodice, or the mode of her *fontange*.

I was right. In the great hall the sun which swept regally through the emblazoned windows scorned to waste its light on the tapestry and the armour, even scorned the portraits of the mighty Polenstjerna; but it lingered lovingly on the hair and cheek of my Lady, now saluting her strange guest with the stateliest decorum.

My Lady's aunt, who was no Swede, stood stiff and haughty in her Polish pride, ignoring my presence, as she thought it her duty to do, for a freezing quarter of an hour. Hence I had ample time to study the newcomer. He was a small man, was this Herr Graf, exceedingly neat and trim of figure, with a sallow complexion and a pair of restless black eyes which were now surveying my pupil with undisguised pleasure. Insignificant as he looked when compared with the tall, fair Swedish nobles, he had an ease and distinction in his carriage that breathed the very air of courts.

"The Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen," explained the Fru Countess, "has journeyed to Sweden on affairs of state, but he has been good enough to bring us news from Dresden of my son."

The gentleman with a quiet wave of his hand smilingly deprecated this politeness. "I would repeat," he said, "that Count Karl is well and desired me to greet you, Madam, most dutifully." He kissed my Lady's finger-tips as if she were a queen and he were accustomed to kiss the hands of queens. What an awkward booby he made me feel!

"Do you stay long in Sweden, Herr Graf?"

"That, Countess, I hardly know." He glanced at the elder lady, half smiling. "I await orders and instructions from my master, the King of Poland." Again he glanced at the Fru Countess.

My pupil turned impulsively to her aunt. "Madam," *she said*, "I beg you to assure the Herr Graf how gladly

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we would welcome any friend of my cousin Karl in our home."

The restless black eyes twinkled. "You do me," he said, "an honour which I little deserve. But I have heard so much from Count Karl of this noble castle, of its fair mistress (a bow), and of the Countess his mother (another bow), that I would gladly trespass on your hospitality if"—and his eyes positively sparkled—"if the affairs of his Majesty permit." Most gentlemen of quality feared the Fru Countess almost as much as I did, but to-day the haughty dame I could have sworn was as near to awe of this black-eyed noble with the airs of a dancing-master, as she could be of any man.

After a few minutes' frigid conversation the ladies withdrew, leaving me alone with the noble stranger in a sad quandary. But to my intense astonishment the Herr Graf at once flung his graces of the salon to the winds.

"You are the tutor to the young Countess?" he asked, smiling, with a pinch of snuff an inch from his perky nose.

"That is so, Herr Graf."

He drew the snuff in thoughtfully. "You are a happy man," was the brisk remark.

I blushed deeply, but how could I deny it? Whereupon his eyes twinkled more than ever.

"This is a noble castle," was his next speech, while he proceeded to walk up and down, now staring at the famous ceiling with its wonderful apotheosis of the great Polenstjerna Field Marshal as painted by the renowned hand of Monsieur Ehrenstrahl, now poking his humorous nose with a boy's curiosity into the armour. "A noble castle," he repeated. "The ancestors of mademoiselle your pupil had learned how to make the Catholic heretics of my country pay for being thrashed, eh, Herr Tutor?"

"Sir!" I exclaimed, bewildered. He took another pinch of snuff. "The abbey and monasteries were worth sacking then," he said regretfully, "and bless my soul! they did it

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so well that they left precious few pickings for you and me to-day." He fingered one of the dusty, tattered banners comically. He had recognised it ; it came from Dresden.

But to his remarks I did not think it fit to reply. I allowed him to prowl in silence about the trophies of Bavaria, Franconia, the Priests' Alley, and Poland, on which the victorious Field Marshal on the ceiling, soaring in the plump arms of Fame and Bellona, eternally smiled as only M. Ehrenstrahl can make a warrior smile. Presently he stopped, as I knew he would, and drew a sharp, deep breath.

"Is that the Countess Ebba?" he asked with hoarse reverence.

"Oh! no; that is *a* Countess Ebba, not *the* Countess Ebba." I smiled.

"A very proper distinction," he observed dryly. "I can see M. Martin is a man of taste."

Now there was much remarkable in that portrait, from which he could not take his eyes. Round the antique frame clustered a strange and thick line of dust, and a magic spell seemed to haunt the canvas, whose colour was as lustrous as if it had been painted yesterday. Stranger still, the woman, clad in the purest white, was as like my Lady as a picture that was not a portrait could well be — the same exquisite shape, the same wonderful golden hair, blue eyes, and marvellous skin, the same proudly innocent pose of the head.

"And pray who," he asked at length, "might this noble lady be?"

"The Fröken Countess can tell her story better than I can," I answered; "there is another portrait of her in King Eric's Tower."

He stared at me, half a dozen questions on his lips. "King Eric's Tower," I hastened to add, "is a disused part of the castle; the lady in the picture, the White Countess she is called here, is said to haunt it, and so no one will or would live there."

He gave his head a pert cock. "*Diantre!* I would gladly

The Last and also the First Lesson 13

live there," he rapped out, "if that lady would live there too—" a remark both frivolous and improper, which sent a shiver of indignation through me.

He was actually beginning to hum a song, the sort of song that Axel, the seneschal's nephew, sings when he has been too long in the kitchen.

"You speak German?" he asked abruptly. I stared. How could he know that?

"Indifferently well," I answered shyly. "I spoke it better when I was a student in the University of Heidelberg."

"Then let us speak it now. French is a language for women, German for men. Heidelberg"—he pursued—"they are gay sparks, the students of Heidelberg."

I gazed at him indignantly, whereupon he betook himself to his prowling and humming, until Greta interrupted us. The Fröken Countess had left a fan; would the Herr Grefve allow her to take it? Of course. The Herr Grefve even helped her to look for it, and Greta glided away, pink to the ears at such condescension.

"*Potztausend!*" he startled me by exclaiming; "that's a pretty wench." He was peering at the ceiling, and I followed his eye to discover which of M. Ehrenstrahl's buxom goddesses had evoked this curious description.

"Which?" I asked, puzzled.

"That—that wench who's just gone," he said, still gazing upwards.

"What! Greta?" The idea was as astonishing as it was new. Yet, now that I reflected on it for the first time, I felt there was some justice in the remark. Greta had the lively eyes and pink-and-white cheeks of most Swedish girls of her class.

"Greta!" he murmured; "a pretty name for a pretty wench. And what a bewitching costume! Pretty! why, man, she is as lovely as her mistress."

"Herr Graf!" I protested, angrily. To compare my Lady with her woman!

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"Come," he said, saucily; "how many kisses has she given you, eh, Herr Tutor?"

"Kisses—" I choked, and he actually dared to sing in my face a ribald ditty.

*"Küsse nur ein Jedermann,
Wie er weiss, will, soll, und kann!
Ich nur und die Liebste wissen
Wie wir uns recht sollen küssen!"*

"Herr Graf," I answered, "you do the Countess's woman as much injustice as you do me. You forget the position which I have the honour to occupy in the household of the Grefvinna Polenstjerna."

"Bravo!" he cried, and he sniggered over his snuff-box. "But there! I meant no offence. Some day you will understand that it is often of supreme importance that a wench should be so pretty that a man, my student of Heidelberg, would be aware of it; and if you think so what harm in saying it, politely, of course, and in a manner consistent with the position which you have the honour to occupy in the household of the Grefvinna Polenstjerna?"

"Sir," I replied stiffly, "until it fell from your lips, the idea which you are pleased to discuss had never entered my head."

He gazed at me for a minute. "*Allmächtiger Gott!*" he muttered, and sniggered again.

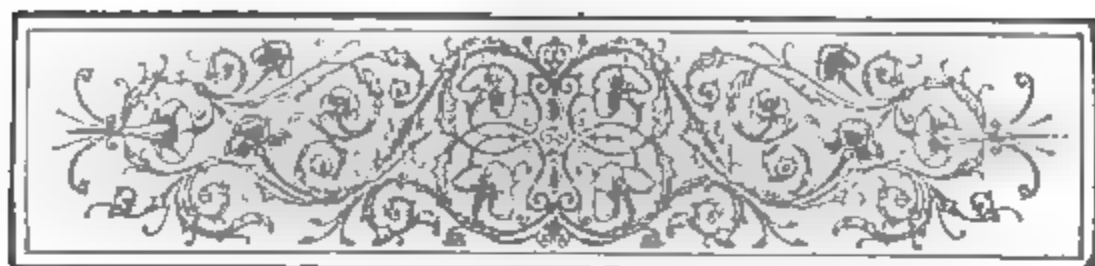
I was still very angry. "With your permission," I said, with my best bow, "I will retire to my duties. Herr Graf, I am your obedient servant."

Whereupon he took a step forward and held out his hand in the frankest manner. "Pfui! M. Martin," he said, "you must not be offended. You must excuse one who has lived much of his life in camps. But I have a profound respect for the men of books. I adore *les gens de l'esprit*, and you, I perceive, are a man of wit and parts. You and I must be friends."

The Last and also the First Lesson 15

I confess gentlemen of quality have not always apologised for their incivilities so handsomely to the humble tutor, and there was, withal, something so engaging in his easy smile and distinction of air that resentment was impossible. But stay I would not. I bowed over his hand with no little emotion and retired. As I closed the door he was standing in front of the portrait of the White Countess, softly humming to himself, and a pinch of snuff untasted in his fingers. Ah ! yes. He had but to see the White Countess to be at her feet, and he who was at the feet of the White Countess was already schooled to become the slave of the living Countess Ebba. And against that sweet and bitter thought what had the philosopher Plato to offer ?





CHAPTER II

THE STORY OF KING ERIC'S TOWER

TO my disappointment that afternoon the noble visitor from Germany was not taking the air in the gardens. In his place there sauntered round the central fountain the dignified figure of my Lord Bengt, chatting in grave gaiety with the Countess Ebba. What a striking contrast to my blue-eyed, goldenhaired pupil my Lord was ! For he was one of the dark Polenstjernas ; and his sallow complexion, square-cut jaw, and black eyes reminded you in the most uncomfortable way of the mighty Field Marshal himself, not as painted by the imagination of M. Ehrenstrahl, but as he sat on horseback in his plumes and corselet opposite to the White Countess in the hall. True, the resemblance ended there, for you would not easily have taken my Lord for a captain in his Majesty's famous corps of Trabants, so studious was his mien. But look a little closer and you will mark the spareness of his figure, the brisk alertness of his carriage, and the subtle air of command clothing his whole person. To myself he always was the model of the true nobleman ; one who, for all his skill with the sword and his mastery in the saddle, did not despise books ; one who had seen the world and men of affairs, but who showed it, as he showed his breeding, not by words but by his bearing.

With a finished curtsey he led my Lady to the spot where I was timidly standing. " My cousin," he said, in the most friendly tones, " tells me that you are really departing, M.

The Story of King Eric's Tower 17

Martin. I am sorry for her sake and my own." Happily I was saved from further embarrassment by the appearance of the Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen, escorting the Fru Countess down the Terrace with a gallantry wholly indescribable ; and I slipped out of notice as the two gentlemen were introduced.

I had long observed with pain that my Lord Bengt was no favourite with his aunt, and to-day Madam was colder and haughtier than ever. Though the sun was magnificently hot, a chill air seemed to fall upon the group. Could it be, I wondered, that here had come at last the suitor of whom Madam deigned to approve ?

"Do you reside at Dresden, Herr Graf?" my Lord inquired, indifferently.

"Sometimes, Herr Grefve. One who is a fighter by trade never resides long in one place."

"A fighter!" burst from my pupil's lips. "Pray tell us with whom? At Polenstjerna we love nothing so well as tales of fighting."

The Graf laughed softly. "With whom have I not fought?" he replied, gaily. "As a lad I had the honour to commence under a Marshal of France, Monsieur le Vicomte de Turenne, and since that day, thirty years ago, I have drawn my sword under most of the great captains of Europe, with one exception, his late Majesty of Sweden."

"Were you, Herr Graf, in the last campaign in the Netherlands?" My Lady had not noticed the sly twinkle in his eyes, but my Lord looked up and gently pressed his thin lips together.

"A man," the Graf answered slowly, "cannot, alas! be in two places at once. At that time I was serving under the finest soldier, in my poor judgment, in Europe to-day, his Highness, Prince Eugène of Savoy. Ah!" he cried, "he is indeed a captain among a thousand. *Monsieur le petit Abbé*, they call him at Vienna, but we who saw him at Zenta have another name for him, *Der edle Ritter, Prinz Eugen*. And

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I venture to think, if M. Martin will pardon me, that had his Highness been in the Low Countries, Monseigneur le Duc de Luxemburg would not have had things so much his own way. But I must not speak of what I have not seen. Perhaps you, Herr Grefve, were there?" The tone was insultingly polite.

"I had the good fortune," my Lord answered with serene composure, "to see the taking of Namur."

That was so characteristic of my Lord. He had served with much glory all through the unequal struggle with Monseigneur le Duc de Luxemburg, and he had never left, my Lady told me, the elbow of my Lord Cutts in that awful *mêlée* on the bloody glacis of Namur.

"Would I could say the same!" the Graf blurted out in his surprise. "Were you at Steinkirk and Landen too, Herr Grefve?"

My Lord simply bowed. About these, too, he might have said something.

"Ah," the Graf murmured, his eyes flashing, "I would give my left hand to have been of those who caused the *Maison du Roi* to reel at Landen!"

A light burned in Bengt's face, as if with the memory of a supreme moment.

"That honour," he replied, with his slow smile, "belongs to M. Martin's nation. But you, Herr Graf, may yet have the pleasure, perhaps at Landen, perhaps nearer home."

"True," the Graf laughed. "The young hotbloods at Versailles hope before long to change the fashion in cravats."

"Ah!" whispered my pupil, "it is something to be a man." She was not thinking of the lace Steinkirks of the chivalry of France. No, her eyes were whence the sea breezes blew from the east, out there where Polenstjernas had fought "For God, the Protestant Faith, and Sweden."

"If I mistake not," Bengt observed, quietly, "the Herr Graf must be able to tell of my cousin Karl's journeys much which is interesting not to say diverting."

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The Graf caught the proud resentment in Madam's eye. "*Ma foi!*" he interposed, swiftly, "I have little fear that my friend, Count Karl, will be able to divert his fair cousin for more than a summer's day. But the excellent M. Martin has stirred my curiosity for history of another kind, and you, Countess, alone can satisfy it."

"I?" my Lady questioned. "What have you been saying, Monsieur Tutor?"

The Graf kindly explained, since the frowns of the Fru Countess had deprived me of speech.

"The afternoon is fine," Bengt interposed, smiling. "It is an afternoon for King Eric's Tower. Madam, shall we lead the way?"

When my Lord chose to be masterful he was irresistible, and the Fru Countess took his arm meekly while we followed to the great hall.

In the rich sunlight the woman in the picture looked a goddess and a queen in one. The immortal sorrow that haunted her face and eyes and gave them a sweet pathos could surely teach us that in God's universe sorrow and beauty are twin sisters.

We waited for my Lady to speak.

"That," she commenced gently, "is my great-great-aunt, the sister of the Field Marshal whose portrait is behind you."

"He sacked and burned my castle," whispered the Graf wickedly to me, and then stopped with a short exclamation. It was indeed marvellous. Here before us in the flesh lived again the grim general and the Countess Ebba in the persons of my Lady and her dark-browed cousin.

"She was born," pursued my pupil, "in King Eric's Tower. Her betrothed was killed in Muscovy, fighting at the King's side, and after that she refused to marry, for she loved, and who can wonder——"

"Ebba," interrupted the Fru Countess, icily, "pray remember that this is idle gossip, not such as should be related now."

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“ Madam,” came the proudly deferential reply, “ I know of nothing that is not honourable to the Countess Ebba. With your permission I will continue.”

The Fru Countess walked stiffly away to sit down in her chair by the chimney-piece, where she strove to fan her wrath into thin air.

“ She loved,” my Lady began afresh, “ and who can wonder? her king. Before the King left Sweden for the last time she saw him in this hall, just where you are standing, Herr Graf. What passed between them no man knows, but she never saw his Majesty Gustavus Adolphus again, and when her brother returned from the war she had long been dead. But here on the wall hung the portrait. It has never been revealed who painted it nor why, but a writing was left, asking that it might never be removed from its place. From that day no man or woman's hand has dared to touch it, for the dust around the frame is part of the honour that we, the living, would pay to the dead. We all believe,” my Lady added in a deepened voice, “ that if the picture falls the ruin of the Polenstjernas is not far off. On that wall, then, the White Countess must hang till God in His own good time ” —and there she stopped, choked with emotion.

“ Madam,” the Graf said, with a profound bow, “ you have shown us the picture and told us the story of a woman for whom any man would be happy to live and prouder to die.”

It was no courtly compliment ; a sincerity to which my heart went out thrilled his voice, causing my Lady to flush with pleasure. My Lord bent his tranquil eyes on the speaker ; some hidden thought gleamed for an instant beneath his dark brows and then sank, as a stone sinks in a deep mere.

And here Madam must interrupt. To King Eric's Tower she coldly refused to accompany us ; nay, more, my Lord Bengt must stay with her to discuss business. So, nothing loth, we left aunt and nephew to enjoy each other's society.

The Story of King Eric's Tower 21

A long gallery led us to the grim oaken door, studded with huge nails and clamped with antique rusty bands, which barred the way to the Tower. Greta appeared with the keys, and after considerable coaxing the ponderous portal swung open with gruesome groans. At once a chill blast in whose icy breath lingered the taint of dead men's bones swept in our faces. We were now standing in a dark, vaulted passage, flagged with rough stones, immured by walls shaped assuredly by the hammer of Thor himself or the gnomes who Greta believed lived in the unfathomable well beneath the keep. Gradually the dim light revealed narrow, blinking apertures for crossbows, and perhaps you could make out at the far end a steep flight of stairs leading up to another ponderous door. Greta, whose teeth were chattering, produced a torch, and by its cheerful glow my Lady picked her way daintily forward. "My father," she said, with a forced gaiety, "called this corridor *La Salle des Pas Perdus*, because the prisoners came and returned along it. Polenstjerna has no prisoners now, nor will, I fancy, ever again have them."

The Graf sneezed violently ; he was fortifying himself against the taint of dead men's bones by covert pinches of snuff.

One more wrestle with rusty bolts and we had won entrance to the heart of this ancient stronghold. The large chamber, exceedingly lofty and hewed from Titanic blocks of stone, had nothing to relieve its vastness save a rickety, worm-eaten table and two antique chairs. Crushed by the stillness one could feel how thick were the walls, on which the fantastic tapestry, torn and rotten, flapped drearily in the salty gusts which eddied from the groined window. Outside, the hoarse cry of a seabird, wheeling in its free flight, stole in, muffled and mocking, its shrill notes all but stifled by the sullen surge of the Baltic, foaming under the keen east wind against the rocks on which this sentinel tower stood. Dear God ! how often had that mocking note not been heard

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where we were shivering, by sick and prisoned hearts for whom life had no hopes and death no terrors !

" Beneath our feet," whispered my Lady, " are the dungeons."

" *Diantre !*" the Graf muttered; " I would not be in the power of the master of Polenstjerna so long as he has this sweet cabin."

It was good in that grisly place to hear my pupil's laugh.

" The last prisoner," she said, with a sudden sternness, " was a traitor Swede who plotted against his late Majesty. That was nearly forty years ago."

" Did they hang him ?" the Graf asked, peering into her face.

" No," she pressed her lips tightly ; " he hanged himself." My Lady had a tender heart, no woman a tenderer, but one sin she could never forgive, and that was treason — treason in a Swede ! The thought of it made her eyes as the eyes of the black Field Marshal himself.

" There is another chamber here," my Lady said, raising a mouldering curtain. We stared in—a small room, drowned in darkness, for it had no window. One glance was enough ; we drew back and chafed our hands. Then my pupil stepped to the chimney-piece and the flaring torch shot into our ken the Polenstjerna arms. " They tell," she said, " that the mason forgot the motto and that the White Countess added it herself—'*Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !*'"

" I do not wonder," the Graf whispered, with a jerk of his thumb at the words, " that that *pauvre diable* of a prisoner hung himself."

Up went the torch and — there was the White Countess again, younger and more virginal even than the woman who reigned in the sunlit hall. Here in this ghoulish chamber she was a girl, pure, tender, and proud, just as her great-great-niece whose golden hair the torch embraced in a flaming halo. What a wondrous sweetness and freshness they both *breathed* into the damp dusk that else had choked us!

The Story of King Eric's Tower 23

The Graf gazed spellbound until my Lady walked swiftly away and held the light down to the wall beneath the window. She was pointing to a clumsy design — three crowns, as in the Royal arms to-day, and below two letters—"E. R."

"Ericus Rex," she said, softly, "poor king! poor, mad king!"

Still lower three more letters could be spelled out. "G. A. R." "Gustavus Adolphus Rex," she interpreted, her voice quivering. "On that wall is written, Herr Graf, the story of a king's and a woman's broken heart."

"Let us go," said my pupil, after a pause. No sound relieved the awful stillness, save that muffled, sullen roar, as of a caged beast, fretting and gnawing at the walls without, and baffled. We gladly followed her till she stopped at the foot of the stairs. "The door yonder," she explained, "leads to the dungeons. Men, and women too, have perished in them, but, thank God! that is over now."

"It is not over everywhere," muttered the Graf, his eyes growing fierce and hard. My Lady led us across the *Salle des Pas Perdus* to a winding stair concealed in the walls. Up the worn stones we groped, a pause, and then as if by magic we were with the turrets in the sunshine, could see the blue sky and the fleecy clouds. Here at last was a world in which a man could breathe and live. The Graf, as became a soldier who had fought at Zenta, carefully inspected the scene.

"*Ma foi!*" he cried, "this is a castle which not even *Monsieur le petit Abbé* would care to besiege."

"Ah! Herr Graf," was the proud answer, "men have often tried—Christian the Bloody and his Lübeckers, Sigismund the Papist and his Poles, Danes, and Swedes too, often, but it has never been taken, and it never will — until the portrait of the White Countess falls, which God forbid!"

We stood on King Eric's Tower fronting east and descending sheer down into the water. Behind us rose the newer flanking towers flashing their green copper domes

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like burnished gold in the westering sun, between which you could catch a glimpse of the outer courtyard, the Senechal's Gateway, and the green-banked moat. Southwards stretched the pleasaunces and trim walks of the gardens, beyond which lay the wharf with the boats clustering round the red-roofed village of my Lady's retainers. Yet it was seawards that the eye naturally turned, out towards the Baltic dotted along the indented coast with countless rocky isles gleaming in an enchanted mist of sunlit foam, until vision was lost in the dim line where sea and sky met and the stately ships turned to sail up the Mälar Lake. The salt breeze set my pupil's curls dancing as she guided our gaze inland over the grassy champaign and waving woods to where the sun was slowly sinking in a blurred haze of blue smoke and purple clouds. "Stockholm," she cried, proudly, "Stockholm !"

We found shelter behind the parapets, and at my Lady's feet the Graf waited eagerly for the promised story.

"In the room below us," she began, at once, "more than a hundred years ago, our King Eric, the mad king he is called in Sweden, lay hid for many months. It was an unhappy time ; the Polenstjernas, as most families, were torn in two; some were for King Eric, some for his brother, Duke John. Greta could tell you of things that would make your blood run cold, but we only know that one stormy night the poor mad king in a frenzy slew a Polenstjerna, a friend, whom in his blind rage he took for a foe."

"And the letters?" inquired the Graf.

"Some say the King carved them himself, others that it was Catherine, the lowborn woman whom he made his queen, and there they stand to whisper of a king's despair. King Eric's Tower he named it himself, and King Eric's Tower it has been called ever since."

The Graf was not interested in the frenzies of mad kings. "I would rather hear," he said, "of the Countess Ebba."

"Ah ! yes," was the quick answer, "we do not forget it

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is her tower too. You must know that when her brother went to the war in Germany she presently forsook her chamber in that turret yonder and lived alone with her woman in this grim lodging, and here she died of a broken heart. Her woman would later often tell how day after day her mistress would climb up hither and walk up and down, gazing across the seas that would bring her brother and her king home. Poor lady ! she never saw the white sails of their fleet ; she heard of some of their glorious victories, but, thank God ! she was spared the news of Lützen."

" And the picture ? "

" It was painted for her betrothed, and she hung it with her own hands in the tower of King Eric."

" There is a story about that, too ? " questioned the persistent Graf.

" Yes, there are many stories ; so many that M. Martin, who has written them in his papers, could make a book of them. Perhaps he will some day. Greta and the wenches in the kitchen on the winter nights when the snow-storms howl round the battlements would swear that they heard the king's mad voice calling for vengeance on the traitors who would undo him. They believe, too, that the White Countess walks now in the *Salle des Pas Perdus*, now along this parapet. Not a maid, nor a man for that matter, but would rather die than pass the portal after sunset."

" Ah ! " muttered the Graf ; " ah ! " A strange interest glowed in his twinkling eyes.

" I have never seen her and I pray God I never shall, for the White Countess only shows herself when some terrible danger threatens the kings of Sweden."

" The kings ! " exclaimed the Graf, disappointed. It was always these mad kings who intruded at Polenstjerna. He was not a Swede to understand that the history of Sweden is the history of her kings.

" Yes, the kings," my Lady repeated. " Three times only has the Countess been seen beyond King Eric's Tower

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— the night before Lützen, the night before Fehrbellin, and a little while ago, the night before the royal palace was burnt down, when the boy King in whom the destinies of our land rest was in the gravest danger. Please God, Herr Graf, in our lifetime we shall never see that vision at Polenstjerna, yet who can foretell what the future has in store for Sweden and Sweden's king ? ”

She looked wistfully out to sea as if she would read the answer in the sob of the salt wind. Who indeed could foretell ? His late Majesty had built on ruin and defeat ; he had taught the sleepless foe, the Dane, at the sword's point, to respect his power ; but would the Dane respect the boy to whom his sceptre had passed, — a boy self-willed and obstinate, who sought no man's counsel, of whose mad frolics and wild rides ambassadors wrote and all Stockholm gossiped ? I glanced at the Graf crouching under the parapet in a strangely silent reverie. But there was little comfort in his puckered brow and eyes so gravely perplexed. I shot a stealthy look of pity, almost of remorse, at my Lady's innocent, proud figure. Could it be that the Graf, like my Lord Bengt, spied on the horizon of Schleswig-Holstein that little cloud, as yet no bigger than a man's hand, which would presently fill the earth with its fury ? And then my thoughts took wings to themselves. What if I obeyed my Lady's bidding and I, too, fared over the seas in search of wealth and fame and love ? Others had done it, why should not I ? Ah ! those others were not given to much reading in books, to loving the quiet corner, not timid of speech and sluggish of brain, not yeoman born. No, no, it was impossible. I must leave Polenstjerna and my dear mistress, and earn my bread in my own land, trusting that God in his merciful wisdom would heal my heart and wipe away my foolish dreams.

“ Have you quarrelled or are you asleep ? ” It was my Lord Bengt, stolen upon us unawares. We sprang to our feet shamefacedly.

The Story of King Eric's Tower 27

"No," said my Lady ; " we were not asleep, but I am sure we were all dreaming."

" And here, Herr Grefve," added the Graf, " here is the enchantress."

My pupil threw back her head and laughed with a girl's pleasure at his bow, worthy of a man who had once charged with the *Maison du Roi* and danced at Vienna and Versailles.

" It is always unpleasant to be roused from dreams when they are so agreeable," my Lord answered, with the greatest good humour. " But Madam my aunt, I am charged to say, begs you to descend."

What could have been the Fru Countess's business with her nephew? His glance at the Graf was friendliness itself.

The afternoon for me, alas ! was over. " M. Martin," said the Graf, as we stared in the gallery at the vanishing figures of my Lord and his cousin, " I have to thank you for an entrancing interlude. I repeat, you are a lucky man. I have seen many famous beauties in my day," he patted his waistcoat ruefully, " but 'pon my soul, the Fräulein Gräfin excels them all. *Allmächtiger Gott!* what she would be at the court of his Majesty Augustus the Strong ! What could she not be ? "

" Herr Graf," again interposed that tranquil voice, " I beg the honour of a few minutes' conversation."

The Graf wheeled round pettishly. It was, of course, my Lord Bengt, and though he must have heard the last remark not a trace of annoyance could be read in his gravely polite eyes as the two gentlemen walked away together.

For some minutes I continued to survey the grim portal through which those silly wenches believed the White Countess passed. And my Lady believed it too. The student knows better. Such idle tales ! pshaw ! and yet I would not have spent a night alone in King Eric's Tower, so little can man's poor reason rule his fleshly imaginings.

As I walked to my chamber a whimpering struck my ear.

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Mercy! It was Greta and in tears. "What is the matter?" I demanded with an effort.

The wench looked at me with astonishment. "Nothing," she sobbed, adding, like a woman, "the Fru Countess has been scolding me."

"The Fru Countess? Why?"

"Because—because I gave the keys of King Eric's Tower to my Lord Bengt, and he has lost them, and the Fru Countess says it is my fault, and it is n't."

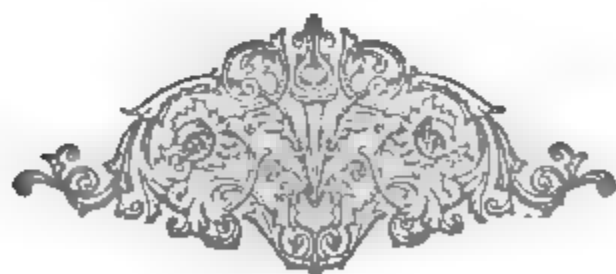
"My Lord will find them again."

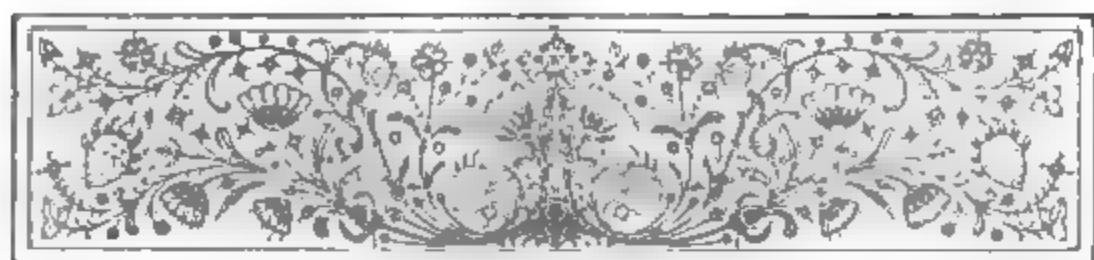
"He has found them," sobbed she.

"Then why are you crying, you silly child?"

"Because father says one of them is missing, and if he tells the Fru Countess she will beat me. The gnomes have stolen it. I knew they would, because we interrupted them. Did you not hear them, sir?"

Pouf! I strode hastily away, out of patience at this tearful fuss over a trifle, conscious only, I am ashamed to say, of how comely Greta looked. And I had taken two years to discover it? Yes, indeed, since the Herr Graf had arrived I had learned much, and if he stayed I would assuredly learn more.





CHAPTER III

A TUTOR'S EDUCATION PROGRESSES

NOR was I wrong. Two days later I was informed that the Fru Countess requested my presence in her parlour. So far my audiences with that noble matron had not been events to be stored in a grateful memory. Well, this would be the last.

Yet to-day, as I stood with trembling knees, she actually deigned to offer me the pretence of a curtsy, and a chair, honours such as had never fallen to my lot before. Did it mean that I was to share Greta's fate and be scolded?

"I am sorry you are leaving us," Madam remarked, composedly folding her shapely hands in her lap, "for you have carried out a delicate and difficult task with discretion,"—she paused,—“great discretion. I beg you to accept my sincere thanks."

I bowed with quite a lump in my throat.

"My niece, the Fröken Grefvinna, owes much to your careful instruction. She is not, I fear, a young lady very,"—she hesitated and smiled,—“very easy to lead. You, M. Martin, have accomplished your duties with exemplary diligence and discretion."

I could only rise and bow a second time.

"I would be of service to you," Madam resumed, "but I am ignorant of your ambitions," she turned her dark eyes on me almost with a motherly look. "Ambitions," she murmured softly.

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A guilty conscience throbbed within me. Would she, could she read my secret? I felt quite faint.

"M. Martin," she began; "I will trespass"—trespass!—"further on your time, for I would invite your confidence and advice, which will be the best proof of what I have been saying." Had the sun touched my head or hers? Confidence! Advice! Of M. Martin, the tutor, to the Fru Countess!

"Yes," she smiled, "I am by nature distrustful, but I have watched you in a delicate and difficult situation and I feel now that your advice will be helpful."

Sorely upset, I stammered out a few words. The scales were dropping off my eyes. As it had been with Greta, for two years I had been blind, nay unjust.

"You are not probably aware," she was saying, "of all the circumstances which must decide the future of my niece. The Fröken Countess, as you know, is sole mistress of Polenstjerna and of the Grafschaft of Hirschstein in Pomerania. Unhappily, neither Polentsjerna nor Hirschstein are what they ought to be." Her mouth hardened, her head went up. "His late Majesty, against all law and justice, deprived the nobles of most, if not all, of what his ancestors had bestowed on them for unexampled services to the Crown. Hireling lawyers called that act of tyranny a 'Reduction'; simple people like myself prefer the term 'robbery.'"

Ah! that terrible "Reduction," by which a strong king at the bidding of a defeated and outraged nation had punished the nobility for their neglect of a sacred trust. Charles XI. had saved Sweden, but never would the nobles forgive the stern Commission by which the Crown had "resumed" most of the lands bestowed in the previous two reigns.

"My niece," she pursued with kindling cheeks, "had been robbed as the rest, had not her father, of blessed memory, betrayed his order and humbled himself in the service of the

robber. But some day, when the evil influence of the councillors of his late Majesty has died away, the government will return to those who by God's ordinance have the right to direct the destinies of this unhappy land."

And yet, among the evil councillors none had been held in higher honour than my Lady's father. "Humbled himself!" Would that the Fru Countess could have seen him, as I had, receiving at Ryswick in the name of his sovereign the *pas* from my Lord of Portland, and a Marshal of France!

"Alas!" Madam was saying, "his present Majesty is still blind to justice. He seeks friends among the lowborn, and he disregards the advice of the Queen-Mother who managed a kingdom before he was in his cradle,"—managed, I heard my Lady saying, so that her son found the Brandenburgher at the gates of Pomerania and the Dane in the land,—“but we live in hope;” she checked herself and smiled a trifle uneasily.

I was more uncomfortable than ever.

"You should know," she resumed, quietly, "that as arranged by her father, of blessed memory, the consent of his Majesty is necessary should the Fröken Countess marry before she is thirty—thirty, when she would be an old woman! M. Martin, I am not ashamed to say that I regard the arrangement as an insult to her kindred. But there it is! unless"—again she checked herself.

This was news indeed, but what had my advice to do with it?

"And yet," she murmured, bitterly, "we have recently been guilty of the folly of increasing the power of the Crown."

To be sure. The nobles, as all the world is aware, had upset his father's will, had declared the King at fifteen to be of age, had thrust absolute power upon him, and were now indignant because he was ungrateful enough to refuse to surrender his prerogative to their keeping.

"Ah, M. Martin, we arrange these things better in my country and in yours. It is folly to allow a king too much

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power, and mark my words"—a third time she checked herself. For all her gracious condescension she could not forget that a tutor was not the person with whom a countess should discuss affairs of state. "But to resume,"—she was smiling now,—"it will be news to you that it was the dearest wish of my niece's father, of blessed memory, that her husband should be my son, Count Karl."

My hat dropped on the floor. No wonder my Lord Bengt had eyed the Herr Graf from Germany!

"Has my nephew, Count Bengt," she asked in a low voice, "spoken to you of my son?"

"Never, Madam."

She was curiously relieved. "My son," she said, picking her phrases carefully, "is high-spirited, as I hope a son of mine always would be. But a young noble is exposed to many temptations. It is a delicate matter, but to you, a tutor, a mother may speak freely. Women, M. Martin, even women of quality, alas! are not always what they should be. The young noble takes time to discover this—ahem!—regrettable fact. When he has learned it, he has learned much; you will agree, I am sure."

I bowed to cover my confusion. If Madam meant that great ladies were not always what they appeared to be, I agreed gratefully. The Countess had herself taught me *that* in half an hour.

"It is most desirable," she urged, "that my son should return as speedily as possible. I cannot leave Polenstjerna, but will *you* do a mother the favour of visiting Dresden on your way back to England?"

"Countess!" I exclaimed. This time I made no effort to recover my dropped hat.

"You are surprised. That is very natural. But think. You will see something of a brilliant city,—of the world,—and above all you will earn a mother's gratitude." The Fru Countess had vanished. In her place I saw a woman whose voice was soft and supplicating.

"I do not ask you to decide at once. But reflect. A visit to Dresden will add perhaps six weeks to your journey, and I will take care that you travel in a way which befits a trusted envoy of Polenstjerna Castle."

My mind had flown to the Terrace, the infinite blue Baltic, and the salt air. Fate had worked a miracle.

"Your abilities and discretion," broke in the coaxing voice, "are such that no mother could desire a better friend for her son." Friend! M. Martin a friend! I could have hummed one of the Graf's ditties.

The Countess rose, a fresh appeal in her confiding eyes. "Believe me," she urged, "you will be doing my niece a service as well as my son and myself."

I rose too, and then chill mistrust and icy doubts swamped my spirit.

"Madam," I faltered, "you flatter me, but——"

"No, I do not," she replied, gently. "Your modesty does you credit."

"I am so ignorant of the world——"

"You will not think me unkind if I say that it is in that direction that I would help you to help yourself. My experience tells me that you deserve to attain to something better than to remain a tutor——"

It was my Lady's voice and words. I was again on the Terrace under the roses, wondering, hoping, despairing.

"But, Madam, would not the Graf"——

"You do not understand," she interrupted, reproachfully, "that I would show we are grateful for your services here. Further, this is a family affair which cannot be explained to everyone. I will not press you"; she paused, and sat down. "But you will, I am sure, in any case regard as strictly confidential——"

A fierce resolve swept down on me, scattering my misgivings as the east wind scatters the spray.

"Countess," I said, "I will go and do my best."

"You have decided as a man of spirit should," were her

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quiet words, and her eyes were moist. "I am very grateful."

My heart was in a flutter at my audacity, yet soothed by her gracious thanks.

"We must talk of this later," she added. "At present I simply ask you to keep your resolution a secret. If necessary, you may inform my niece that you contemplate a brief visit to Dresden, but nothing more, if you please. There are reasons——"

I hastened to assure her that she could rely on my silence, and I retired before the stateliest curtsy that ever dismissed a tutor, conscious only that the Fru Countess had been, nay, still was, a handsome woman.

Passing to my chamber whom should I meet but my Lord Bengt?

"Perhaps you can tell me," he inquired politely, "whether Madam my aunt is in her parlour?"

"Certainly, Herr Grefve. I have just left her."

His cool gaze rested for an instant on my flushed face, then he smilingly bowed his thanks and we parted. As I turned into the gallery I noticed that my Lord strode past the parlour door and took the passage leading to the gardens. It is curious, is it not? how trifles will force themselves on the mind when it is torn with torturing thoughts and fierce emotions. For some hours I sat on my bed, bewildered. What revolutions in a man's life a single minute may work! what glimpses into the unknown it may unlock! I had come from the Fru Countess, elated, confident, triumphant. But alas for a student's dreams! Now that the fever had throbbled itself out of my blood, reflection bred misgivings, misgivings bred fears. Who, indeed, was I, to plunge into a gay city, to persuade a son, a high-spirited son, to return? Count Karl was learning at the hands of women of quality—I shuddered—the lessons that the young noble must learn. And I—I, who trembled if a countess frowned—I was to interfere! I would, I must, fail. Worst of all, why *this* secrecy? Could not a mother send a message to her

son without concealing it from everyone but a tutor? Was it because I was to bring back to be my Lady's husband one who was learning—I shivered. God forbid!

A dozen times I started up repentant. A dozen times I sank back with the bitter feeling it was too late. I had pledged my word. To Dresden I must go. When at last the evening breeze whispered through the lattice that the sun was set, I could endure my chamber of torture no longer. I was alone in the world. My only friend was that noble Terrace and the consoling sob of the sea. But hardly had I walked a few yards when to my stupefaction I became aware that below me in the shadows stood two figures.

"Trust me, Ebba,"—it was my Lord's voice,—"a little patience, and it will be all right."

"No, no, Bengt," floated up the pleading answer, "I must listen to you no longer. I have listened too long already. Go, please go!"

"But, sweetheart——"

"It is your duty and it is mine. Leave me, I beseech you!"

"Never!" The iron determination in his accents was thrilling. "Never!"

"But, Bengt, it cannot, cannot be."

"Cannot!" A low laugh. "Cannot! It shall be! Patience. We must wait——"

I fled away. I had heard too much, too much. Another secret! This was terrible. I leaned against the cold, damp statue of the Goddess of Love which so proudly graced the Terrace, and was supremely miserable. I was thinking, thinking. Could I never stop thinking now, since that Herr Graf had come and all had begun to go wrong? Secrets all around me! They flitted about me like bats in the murky air. I drove them away; and back they flitted again. Out from the cool air, on other August nights so divinely fragrant, groped an evil mystery.

"Are the books so cheerless," said a gay German tongue,

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“that M. Martin must needs console himself with the caresses of a lady of stone?”

“I desired,” I replied, peevishly, “to drive away my thoughts.”

“A student runs away from his thoughts, oh, pfui! Come! I will be the physician, and I recommend three sovereign remedies—tobacco, wine, and cards. Have you ever tried them, Herr Tutor?”

“Tobacco,” I faltered.

“Bravo! Permit me to join you in your chamber in half an hour and——”

His rollicking ditty carolled through the air as he sauntered off. I hurried back to my room. It is not every day that a tutor has the honour to receive a Herr Graf who had fought under Marshal Turenne and Prince Eugène, a Graf who travelled on the king's business.

“Faith, a pleasant apartment,” were my visitor's first words, “and, like M. Martin, most admirably tidy and sober. *Allmächtiger Gott!* it is more snug here than in King Eric's Tower, eh? Ah, my friend, I always find that philosophers have a proper respect for the carnal body. Quite right, quite right.” He was in an exuberant humour, and his eyes danced.

“Come in,” he cried, to my speechless astonishment; and, bless my soul! in tripped Greta, blushing as red as the flagon of wine which she gravely placed on the table.

“Thank you, my dear,” he nodded, looking her up and down. “Has M. Martin ever told you your fortune? What! no? Then show me your hand and I will.” He peered solemnly at the extended palm. “Pfui! for shame, you pretty minx!” his eyebrows went up. “But you cannot help it. Here's to your sweetheart,—sweethearts, I should say, and may they all be true!”

He drained a glass with gallant gusto. Greta dropped a curtsy and fled.

“M. Martin,” he began, reprovingly, “my Lady's father,

of blessed memory," his eyes twinkled, "divined what would suit a delicate palate such as yours and mine. You will observe, too, how careful I am to remember the position which you have the honour to occupy in the household of—" he chuckled hugely. "Come, confess, my dear sir, you have thrown away two years; never mind, a young man, heigho! can always make up for lost time."

I could only stare like Greta while he found a chair, filled a long pipe, and sipped his wine until he burst into a fit of laughter. "*Potztausend!*" he exclaimed; "there's no better company than a jolly hermit."

Whereupon I laughed too and surrendered; and we clinked our glasses as if we had been students in the University of Heidelberg.

"You return to England?" he inquired.

I nodded, blushing. Well, it was true, if not the whole truth.

"It is a great mistake," he murmured.

"Herr Graf, I presume the mistake will be mine."

"Of course. I was merely reflecting that not many young men have your chances. Why, man," he cried, "if you chose, you could make your fortune. You will never make it by those,"—he waved his pipe at the long line of dearly loved folios,—"*never!*"

"I suppose you tell that by my hand."

"A neat *riposte*," he replied. "But no. A woman's fortune lies in her hand, be she countess or serving-wench; a man's in his brain—not, mark you, other men's brains, as the student imagines. Take my word for it, a young man never had such a chance as now. God! if I were only young again!" The blaze in his eyes warmed the heart better than the red wine of my Lord of blessed memory.

"You all talk like that," I said, slowly. "In Heaven's name, what is coming?"

"No one knows. They don't know at the Court of St. James, nor at Versailles, nor at The Hague, nor at Stock-

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holm." For a brief instant a mysterious burden crept into his voice. "But look around you,—look at the kings: a dying idiot at Madrid without heirs, an exiled king at St. Germain, an asthmatic schemer in London, and not far from us an ignorant boy who spends his time hunting bears. But I will tell you what I make of these things — war! war such as has not been since that black Field Marshal harried the monks from the Elbe to the Danube 'For God, the Protestant Faith, and Sweden!' And in war is the young man's chance."

"To be sure, of being killed."

"But a young man cannot make a fortune or win a woman's love without running that risk."

"And supposing that he does not want those things?"

"Tut! tut! The young man who does not want a woman's love does not exist. No, no, my friend, you do not win a woman's love," he added, smiling, "by staying by the fireside, particularly if that woman be better born and——"

"Herr Graf, I beg——"

"Go out," he said cheerfully, "and lock the door behind you; go out and measure yourself with the men and women of the real world."

I fiddled with my glass and pipe in silence. Presently he laid his hand on my arm.

"I will tell you," he said, coolly, "what you are thinking. 'Here,' you say, 'is a man who went out into the world as a lad, and at fifty he makes love to a comely serving-wench; he is selfish, a trifle coarse, something of a hypocrite, and above all given to interfere in other men's affairs. Bah! that is not what I, M. Martin, would be.'"

I reddened in contrite confusion.

"I am not angry," he pursued, "not one whit. My task has been to read men's minds as you read books, and I flatter myself I have learned my lesson. Thirty years ago I started *by pinking* an impertinent coxcomb, and all for the blue

eyes of a flaxen-haired Saxon jade who slapped my face next day because, forsooth, her heart was broken, and I believed the lying minx. I should not be so silly to-day. No, to-night I get a good flagon of wine and the wench's gratitude. But I do not break my heart, nor she hers. My dear M. Martin, the kiss of an empty-headed hussy is one thing, the love of an honest lady another: the hermit thinks they are the same. We who have been tricked a hundred times know better. Believe me, I would not be chattering here if I did not take you as fitted for something better than——"

"Herr Graf," I interrupted, wincing, "I thank you, but you forget I am not as other young men."

"*Diantre!* you have a sword. What more do you want?"

"Yes, I have a sword, but I cannot use it."

"Cannot!" His eyes blazed. "We will soon judge of that. Come, I insist."

In two minutes he stopped, laughing. "*Potztausend!*" he muttered, "you are right. You are bad, damnably bad. But you are in luck; for, let me tell you, I have not met the woman whom I cannot fathom in half an hour, nor the man who after ten minutes will keep out my sword-point. You shall have a lesson."

In a quarter of an hour, when I was dripping with perspiration and my waistcoat was a maze of chalk-marks, I felt he must be telling the truth as to his second point. His wiry little frame was as supple and agile as a cat's; his wrist was as pliable as whipcord and as stiff as steel; his rapidity of thrust simply diabolical.

"That 's better," he said, "much better. You English always have grit, and when a man has grit he can learn anything. *Ma foi!*" he mused; "when I served under Marshal Turenne I met a young Englishman who had grit, the coolest and handsomest young devil I ever saw. We all said he would be a great soldier. I wonder what has become of him?"

"What was his name?" I inquired, mopping my brow.

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He rubbed his forehead. "Plague me if I have n't forgotten it! It was thirty years ago. No, I have it—Churchill, Monsieur Churchill; Jacques his friends called him."

"My Lord of Marlborough," I said smiling, and explained what this meant.

The Graf was much interested. "Well, my friend, if you could imitate his fire and keep your pulse as steady as his used to be you will go as far as he has gone."

I laughed outright. "You forget," I said, "that we have not yet heard the last of Monsieur Churchill."

"Nor," replied he, with a grin, "have we heard the last of M. Martin—*not yet*."

A tap at the door. To the astonishment of both of us, on the threshold stood the Herr Grefve Bengt, amazed at the spectacle—M. Martin panting, his wig tousled, two drained glasses, an empty flagon, and a pair of foils.

"We have been amusing ourselves," said the Graf, calmly, "and we have both learned something."

"I do not doubt it," my Lord replied. "M. Martin has the charming art of surprising his friends. But I will not disturb you. I——"

"Pray, stay," said the Graf. "You, Herr Grefve, can help us."

"How so?"

The Graf handed him a foil with a low bow. "May I have the honour?" he asked.

Amusement curled my Lord's lips. "I did not come here to fence," he said. "But," he added with a sudden flash, "I am always ready to learn."

It was a fascinating sight. They began with the prettiest play imaginable, but very soon passed into grim earnest. Which was the better I had not the skill to decide. To my tutor's eye nothing could have been finer than the coolness and finish of my Lord, nothing more thrilling than the fire and *verve* of the Graf. The quickness of conception, the *cunning in feints* in both was only surpassed by the unerr-

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ing sureness with which they anticipated and baffled each other's designs. Half a dozen times I drew my breath. Ah ! the Graf was touched ! No, not a whit ; he had parried and was within an ace of slipping under my Lord's arm into his very vitals. I grew afraid, so grim were their looks.

"Enough!" Bengt cried, dropping his point. "Enough! M. Martin has had his lesson and I mine. Some day, Herr Graf, you will repeat the instruction." His look turned the courteous bow into a challenge. My Lord had met his match, and he did not like it.

"I am always at your service, Herr Grefve," replied the Graf, gravely. He, too, was ruffled. Had he not fenced a good fifteen minutes, and not scored a point ?

"*Potztausend!*" he muttered, when Bengt had withdrawn. "I spoke too soon. Who would have thought—why, man, he is superb, superb, confound him ! Why could he not go on ? In another minute I had shown him a trick I learned in Italy that—but pouf ! it can wait."

He lunged this way and that to ease his annoyance. The wine flagon and my future no longer had any charms. "To-morrow," he said gruffly, "we must have another lesson. I am getting rusty. Adieu ! my friend, adieu !" And for some minutes the snatches of the camp song with which he strove to appease his wounded vanity floated along the corridor.





CHAPTER IV

SOME FAMILY HISTORY AND A PACKET

FOR the next three days, morning and afternoon, the Graf insisted on my fencing a whole hour; and his forbearance with my clumsiness was really marvellous. "You are improving," he would say encouragingly. "You are slow to learn, but what you learn you keep, and that is the grand secret in fencing as, well as in everything else. *Diantre!* Monsieur Churchill was right. 'Patience overcomes all things,' was the saying ever on his lips, and he had the patience added to the brains and good looks of a god. So stick to it, my friend, and we'll make something of you yet."

Why he should go out of his way to waste his time on me, when he might have been basking in my Lady's smiles, puzzled me much; still more why he should sit, after we had put the foils away, regaling me with talk that was an education in itself. That gay, voluble, shameless tongue carelessly roamed over every topic conceivable,—men, women, fighting, intrigues, camps, salons, alehouses, the cabinets of statesmen, but above all, women — yet I took it as no mean proof of his boasted insight that he never so much as breathed a syllable of the advice which he had so warmly urged on that memorable evening. His nimble wits had grasped that even a tutor has the right to resent counsel which implies, truly enough, perhaps, that he is a poor creature.

For his society I was more than grateful, since, as matters

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stood, I was in a most awkward situation. Madam apparently had forgotten my existence as speedily as had my Lady, whose neglect, so I fretfully called it, touched me to the quick. Neglect, indeed ! After all, M. Martin was M. Martin. Aye, there was the rub, and the Grefvinna Ebba was the Grefvinna Ebba. Yet so unreasonable is man's heart that it will rebel more bitterly against what is fit than against what is unjust.

It happened, however, that my Lady met me on my way to the library, and escape was impossible without grave discourtesy.

"Monsieur Tutor," she said, somewhat coldly, "you have lost all interest in your pupil."

"I have a pupil no longer, Countess," I replied, coldly too ; "but assuredly I have not lost all interest in the mistress of Polenstjerna."

"And are there no lessons for that lady ?"

I plucked up courage. "I have not been asked," I said, "to give any."

"And, pray, must M. Martin always wait to be asked ?"

"It is his place, Madam, to wait and obey."

"And when do you free yourself from that duty ?" she inquired with a repentant return to her old manner.

"I can scarcely say. I trust very soon," the wretched words rushed out.

My Lady broke into a merry laugh. "Faith, sir !" she answered, "we will not keep you at Polenstjerna against your will."

"Oh ! Madam, you do not understand. I do not wish to go——"

"And yet you do. An answer worthy of a woman ! I hope, therefore, I do understand."

And now I was reduced to silent shame and confusion.

My Lady moved away, stood irresolute, eyeing me, and then turned back.

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"M. Martin," she said, fingering her chatelaine nervously, "it was my intention to ask you to give me your company for ten minutes. The Grefvinna Polenstjerna, it seems, may command a lesson; your pupil can only beg a favour——"

"Countess," I cried, imploringly.

"You agree?" she said hurriedly. "I thank you. We shall be undisturbed in my parlour." And forthwith she led the way.

Never before had I been admitted to these cloistral precincts; never before, indeed, had I been quite alone with her in all my two years of service. My foolish heart fluttered with naughty joys. What would Madam say to hear of M. Martin's being closeted with the Fröken Countess, and not even Greta within hearing? My Lady, also, seemed to enjoy and to tremble at her audacity.

"There shall be no lessons here," she observed. "The Grefvinna Polenstjerna begs M. Martin to close the door and take a seat."

The air of the *grande dame* was delicious, and in the sweep of her robe and the wave of her hand the subtle mockery of her aunt simply exquisite. She proceeded to entrench herself behind an enormous fan, and over the rim surveyed my shoes in demure silence.

I timidly stole a look at the clock, at the *escritoire*, at the cluster of miniatures on the wall, at the half-finished embroidery on the frame at her elbow.

"Countess!" I faltered at last.

"Sir!"

I dropped into silence again.

"Countess!" I began, after five horrible minutes.

"Sir!" quoth she.

"May I tell you that when I leave Polenstjerna I contemplate paying a brief visit to Dresden on my way back to England?"

The fan fell from her hand. "To Dresden!" she re-

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peated. This was not surprise ; it was amazement, sharpened by fear.

“ Yes, the way over the seas is leading me to Dresden first of all.” I tried to speak lightly.

“ And you really ”— she stopped suddenly. Ah! there was no *grande dame* now. I saw a girl with troubled eyes. “ May I ask,” she questioned in a low voice, “ was it—was it my cousin Bengt who—who——”

My hat fell beside the fan. We stared at each other.

Presently I found words to assure her that my Lord Bengt knew nothing of my intentions and that I had no desire to inform him.

“ It is strange, passing strange,” my Lady murmured. “ M. Martin,” she said earnestly, “ you know my cousin Karl is at Dresden ? ”

“ I have heard the Graf von Waldschlösschen say so,” I said. It was well she was too busy with her thoughts to mark the guilty blood in my cheeks.

“ When you go to Dresden,” she said, slowly, “ will you take a message from me to my cousin ? ” She looked me pleadingly in the face, and those ungrateful, rebellious thoughts at her neglect crept away ashamed. “ I will be frank, M. Martin. This morning I desired to beg you as a favour to go to Dresden. Now I have only to ask something much less.”

What did this mean ? I was sorely perplexed. First Madam, and now my Lady !

“ For three days,” she said, “ I have been mustering courage to—to—” and I had been fretting at her neglect ! “ I am in trouble, and I thought my tutor——”

“ Oh ! Madam,” I cried, “ command me and I will—” I could not finish.

“ I thank you,” she said simply. With her as with the Fru Countess my consent had eased her mind of a galling burden.

My Lady took something from a table. “ This,” she said, “ will help you to recognise my cousin.” The miniature

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now in my hands was of a young man, a Polenstjerna every inch of him, and resembling my Lady in a surprising way. His eyes were blue, his hair was fair, his complexion delicate as a girl's — a face to charm men and be adored by women. Not even his frank consciousness of birth and breeding did he owe to his mother, for no trace of Polish haughtiness could be read in his Swedish smile.

“He is one of us,” my pupil remarked, contentedly. “And as the message arises from the story, I must tell you that briefly.”

Thanks to Madam, I was quite excited.

“My aunt,” she began, a little sadly, “is not the first Pole who has become a member of our house. From the beginning I might almost say we have been bound up with Poland and the Poles, as we have been with the kings of Sweden. The connection starts in the days of King Sigismund and the strife between him and his uncle, Duke, later King, Charles. As in the time of trouble in the reign of King Eric, our house was divided; the elder son followed the King's example, married a Polish heiress, and became a Roman Catholic. When Duke Charles, a true Protestant, was made king, the younger son, the Field Marshal, inherited Polenstjerna, forfeited by his Roman Catholic brother, and in his line it has remained ever since. Twice since then younger sons have deserted the Protestant religion to marry Polish cousins descended from that Polenstjerna who loved King Sigismund better than Sweden. The last was my uncle, whose son is my cousin Karl. His father died when he was a child, and my father brought him up as a Protestant here at Polenstjerna. For her son's sake my aunt left Poland and ceased to be a Roman Catholic.”

The pause was a bitterer comment than any word could have been. Treachery to the religion in which you were born was as treachery to your king—a sin not to be forgiven.

“Since then two things have happened. My cousin lost *his* Swedish estates——”

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“ Yes,” I interposed, “ the ‘ Reduction—— ’ ”

“ It was right,” my Lady said eagerly, “ perfectly right. We nobles had forgotten our duty; and shame and defeat came upon our land. A strong king saved us; a strong king punished us. My father was one of those who suffered, but he won it back, and he taught me that a Swedish noble’s first duty is to the king.”

Could Madam have heard her! The words were inspired by unquenchable pride of race, pride in an imperishable tradition which is the greatest gift of God to a noble house.

“ Fate has pressed hard on my cousin,” she resumed. “ The Polish house of my aunt has withered away, and now, when one poor old man dies, my cousin will be the heir to great possessions in Poland. To-day he is what my aunt calls a Swedish beggar; to-morrow he may be a Roman Catholic and a Polish prince.”

The trouble gathered in my Lady’s eyes, trouble sweetened by maiden modesty.

“ My father,” she said, “ left it to me as a sacred duty to keep, to save, if need be, my cousin for Sweden — a Polenstjerna with but one duty—‘*Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !*’ Ah ! M. Martin, how can I make you understand what our Protestant Faith has been to Sweden ? It is our kings under God’s hand who have made a poor despised land into a great country,—our kings and our Protestant Faith.”

“ Pardon, Madam,” I thought it right to say, “ an Englishman can understand. Has not our present sovereign, his Majesty William, remembered what our greatest rulers did, and saved us to the Protestant Faith ? Thank God, our nobles and our people know it, and if our rulers forsake the Protestant Faith——”

“ God will forsake you. That is true. May your country and mine remember it always, always ! ” She clasped her hands on her knees in a passionate earnestness. “ M. Martin,” she whispered, “ we must save my cousin Karl.”

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Ah ! I had been on the Terrace, and I understood her distress. What was I to do ?

" My aunt," she said, resolutely facing me, " is not a Swede. She is willing that her son should become a Pole unless—unless——"

" Yes, yes," I cried, quickly, " I understand——"

" I am ready," was her reply ; " if it is my duty it shall be done. But—but—but the truth is that perhaps my cousin Karl is not."

" Countess ! "

" For some time past my cousin Bengt"— the blood stormed into her cheeks —" has been warning —telling me that my cousin Karl is not and never will be ready."

Ah !

" I would not believe it," she said with averted eyes ; " he loved my father ; he is, or was, proud to be a Polenstjerna. But I have learned Bengt may be right."

" The Graf von Waldschlösschen has said something ? "

" Very little." My Lady was surprised at my quickness. " But a woman can feel, and the silence of a friend tells more than speech. My cousin was always,"—she hesitated, —" always—there are beautiful women, his kinswomen, in Dresden and Warsaw : they would make him a Pole like themselves ; and it is from *that* we must save him."

Ah ! my task at Dresden, after all, would be an easy one. The most beautiful woman in Dresden or Warsaw could never be what God had made one woman in Sweden. Happy Karl ! happy, happy Karl !

" Yes," she said, " I ask you to promise not to leave Dresden until you know that my cousin is returning to Polenstjerna."

" If I have to stay there for ever, I promise."

" Ah ! " she repeated, " it will not be so easy as you think. But return to Sweden he must. You must tell him, M. Martin, of my dead father's wish,—yes," she drew herself up proudly, " you can tell him, if need be, that I am ready."

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“Madam,” I protested with indignant scorn, “if my Lord Karl does not return of his own free will, he does not deserve to return at all.”

“No, no,” she pleaded, “return he must. He can then do as he pleases, as he pleases,” she murmured with a shamed weariness. “You promise?”

“I promise,” I said reluctantly.

She stopped me at the door with a gesture of distress. “I do not like to ask, but I must,” she said slowly. “M. Martin, will you keep what I have said a—a—secret? Karl is my cousin; I am only a girl, it is so easy to misunderstand, and—and—it is all so—so—uncertain.”

I bent low over her hand. It is not for me to say what the sight of her at that moment put into my heart.

“One request more,” she said, now quite calm. “When my cousin returns cannot he bring back with him my tutor? The Grefvinna Polenstjerna,” she smiled, “needs a secretary as much, nay, more, than a great noble in England.”

I thanked her with tears in my eyes. It was better for M. Martin, I tried to say, that he should not return.

“You are right,” she answered, with a little sigh; “Polenstjerna is not the place for M. Martin. But should you change your mind, remember that I—we are always grateful.”

She was thinking of the way over the seas. Ah, me! how could the Countess Ebba dream that it was just her gratitude which made it impossible for the tutor to stay, still more impossible to return?

Outside the door Greta was loitering, and it flashed on me that the wench was watching to see that we were not interrupted. “Only a girl,” had been my Lady’s words; but she was learning that with beauty may come sorrow, that it is not merely in the heart of the yeoman born that love may strive with duty.

The unexpected, I had begun to discover, is sure to be the prelude to something still more unexpected. I had barely

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been in my chamber a half-hour when I was summoned to the Fru Countess. Madam's eyes and voice had lost nothing of their touching friendliness, but, unless I was sorely mistaken, she herself was ill at ease. What could it be that cut a sour line at the corners of her delicate mouth, that made her apologies for the delay sound lame? Yet she was more than pleased when I informed her that I simply awaited her commands, and she promptly handed me a letter to her son with the request that I would aid it with my wisest and most persuasive words. "Do not hesitate to tell him," she added, with fervent earnestness, "that his future and mine depend on his obedience."

To my relief she asked no questions. For some minutes she had been busy at her *escritoire* with a pile of papers. When she faced me again I observed a small packet which in a growing embarrassment she shifted from one hand to the other.

"I will beg you," she said, "to convey this on my behalf to his Excellency the Graf von Flemming."

A pang of terror stabbed me. "The Graf von Flemming, Countess?" I stammered.

Madam blushed through her powder like a chidden girl.

"It contains," she explained with an effort, "certain documents relating to estates in Poland in which my son is interested. I can place them in no safer keeping than yours."

Had it not been for my Lady's speech this morning I had been quite mystified. But if she could speak of this family affair calmly, why should it make Madam's tongue falter?

"And who is the Graf von Flemming?" I asked, as troubled as she was.

The Fru Countess broke into a laugh. "You must not ask such a question at Dresden," she answered, almost waggishly. "For he is a general in the Saxon army, and Gross-stallmeister of Lithuania. It was he who won the Polish crown *for our*—the present king of Poland, the Elector Friedrich

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August. No one has a greater influence with his Majesty, and though he is not yet the most powerful minister in Saxony, mark my words, he will some day, soon, too, have more authority than the King himself. Remember, I beg, that he holds most state secrets in his hands, and that if he choose he can make any man's fortune. He is quick to perceive ability, he loves merit, and he will rule, if he does not already. I ask you, then, to give him this packet with my humble duties."

"Am I—I, then, to present the packet to his Excellency?" I inquired, aghast.

"If you please; you will have no difficulty." But her look well-nigh belied the glib answer.

I took it from her with trembling fingers, and in my fear turned it, as she had done, this way and that. I noticed no writing or direction on the cover; and though it was sealed in half a dozen places the device of the seal was strange; I guessed it to be Polish, but it might have been Arabic, for all I knew.

The Fru Countess was watching me anxiously. "It is a delicate family matter," she whispered, confidentially; "you will, therefore, I am sure, not expect me just *now* to explain more positively. Pray guard the packet most carefully; never permit it to leave your keeping until you have yourself seen it in the hands of his Excellency. On no account mention its existence to anyone else—on no account." She paused and added solemnly, "We—my niece and I—trust to your silence and discretion."

The packet was as cold and heavy as lead. A twitching in my throat made me feel as if the stealthy clutches of that evil mystery groping in the air were closing on my neck.

"Would it not be safer, Madam," I pleaded, "to entrust these papers to a more experienced messenger?"

The Countess shook her head at me playfully. "Your modesty is incorrigible," she said; "believe me, I could not find one whose discretion my niece and myself would trust

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more implicitly. You have forgotten we would do you a service. This packet will give you an admirable introduction to a great man. You will please us both best, if you use the opportunity to the full."

What could reluctance offer against these gracious words, spoken with the frankest confidence? To object further would be churlish, and my word was already pledged to my Lady.

"Fortune," she proceeded, "has enabled me to do for you what I have long desired. You will pardon me if I add one word of advice. If I mistake not, you are a stranger to the ways of a Court?"

I bowed.

"A young man," she said, with a motherly smile, "may learn something from a woman who has seen much of the world. At Dresden you will hear and see many things which will, I fear, surprise, perhaps shock you. I blush to say it, but above all, be on your guard, in your dealings with women. Too many of my own sex—a woman, alas! knows this better than a man—are not what they seem. Did I dare," she said slowly, "I would even warn you against myself. Ah! M. Martin, the woman is not worth the name who would not risk her good fame for her son. But, thank God! I am not called to do that."

The quiver in her voice, the soft moisture in her glowing eyes, were irresistible—a man had been a cur who doubted the sincerity that pleaded for my help.

She beckoned me to a seat, and with an admirable clearness gave me the fullest instructions how I was to sail from Stockholm to Lübeck, how I was to travel thence, and by what route. Finally she provided me with a lordly passport and ample means. Never had a tutor been so generously equipped for a journey as was humble M. Martin.

"Do not spare money," she urged; "you have earned it here and I desire you to enjoy yourself. At Dresden, *pleasure*, I am happy to think, can be yours. If you prefer

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it, I can house you in the palace of my kinswoman, the Princess Rapierska. She is a great lady in Poland, a great lady at the Court, and, if report be true, a beauty."

Fresh terror seized me. At the risk of appearing ungracious I stammered out that I would rather lodge at an inn. It was more fit for one such as I was.

"You must please yourself," she answered indulgently. "And far be it from me to say you are not right. Let me recommend you, then, to find your way to the hostelry called 'The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg.' It lies in the centre of Dresden and close to the residence of his Excellency. It is, moreover, quiet."

I wrote the name down; such an inn was just what I required. The Fru Countess continued her instructions, while I sat and marvelled. She had thought of everything, and the trouble she had taken filled me with gratitude.

"And now, good-bye," she said. "To-morrow I shall be unable to thank you," she smiled, "as I can here. Do you remember what King Louis is reported to have said to your King James when he sent him forth to recover his crown? I say the same, M. Martin, to you. It will be best and happiest for you if I do not see you again. But should fate bring you back to Polenstjerna, no one will give you a warmer welcome than the mistress whom you have served so faithfully, and the friend whom you have so generously helped. *Bon voyage!*"

Not till I was safe in my own chamber did I recollect ruefully that I had brought away with me not merely the memory of a radiant and indulgent lady, but also a packet stamped with strange seals; not till then did the twitching in my throat remind me of the evil mystery that haunted the sombre shadows of a tutor's turret room.



CHAPTER V

THE LIGHTS OF THE WHITE COUNTESS

SEEKING my Lady to inform her of my immediate departure I found only Greta, snugly ensconced in the great window recess by the parlour door, mingling the crooning of her favourite song, *Liten Karin* (the ballad of Little Karin and the King), with the drowsy whirr of her spinning-wheel.

I wheeled round disappointed, when a shy voice said, "You are going away, sir?"

Greta stood in front of me twiddling her thumbs, the picture of confusion, modesty, and audacity.

"Why, certainly," I answered; "what is the matter?"

"Nothing, sir." But there was.

"Come, what is it?"

She pushed at the wheel with her foot, rather a pretty foot. "Do not go away," sprang out the words while she reddened all over.

"Greta! You are forgetting yourself."

"Last night," she replied, in an awed voice, "father saw the lights of the White Countess in King Eric's Tower. It is a sign."

"What nonsense! Your father had been drinking too much *brännvinn*."

"It is true," she persisted. "I saw them, too, from my room by the Fröken Grefvinna. I do not drink *brännvinn*. It is no time to travel, when the gnomes hammer all day and the White Countess shows her lights by night."

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“ My good child, you may not drink *brännvinn*, but you dream. You should not let such oldwives’ gossip trouble you.”

“ No, no, it is true. I did not dream. I could not sleep the whole night.”

The dignity and terror in the wench were quite comical. Greta aped my Lady and aped her well.

“ Well, well,” I answered, “ let it be so. But the White Countess has nothing to do with me.”

She looked at me with shy surprise, and began once more to twist up her apron. “ Yes, sir, she has,” she murmured.

Then I laughed outright. “ With me ? How so ? ”

But she would not even look me in the face. “ If I tell you, sir, you will be angry.”

“ No, I promise.”

She tugged at the apron ; her voice dropped to a whisper. “ It is, it is, because — because you love the Fröken Grefvinna.”

“ It is not true, it is not true ! ” I cried, beside myself with rage, “ and if you ever dare to speak of this—this—again—” I choked and marched off in the deepest dudgeon, leaving her to her spinning and her stupid songs.

“ In love with the Fröken Grefvinna ! ” and to be told of it by a waiting-wench forsooth ! the shameless hussy ! No doubt the whole castle was chattering and joking over it. And it was true, it *was* true, deny it as I might ; and Greta knew it was true, and the whole castle knew it was true. Oh, what a precious fool I had been ! what a precious fool I still was !

“ The lights of the White Countess,” “ the hammers of the gnomes,” “ no time to travel ! ” Bah ! that men and women should believe such worn-out and devilish superstitions ! Yesterday it had been Count Karl ; to-day it was the General von Flemming ; who would it be to-morrow ? And the packet in my valise cried out that I had promised the Fru Countess because I loved the Fröken Grefvinna.

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"H'm!" the Graf muttered dryly that evening, as he put the foils away, "it is a pity you will not have me to teach you any longer. But what has put you out, my friend? You are simply boiling with determination. Is it because you are leaving us to-morrow?"

I scrambled into my coat. "How do you know that I am leaving to-morrow?" I retorted, sulkily.

He stooped deliberately to pick up his coat, as deliberately dusted its dainty lace ruffles, and then very slowly put it on, humming all the while. "It is regrettable," he drawled, as he fumbled with the bowl of his pipe, "that you forgot to ask Greta for another flagon of the Burgundy so carefully selected by the Herr Grefve, of blessed memory."

"Graf!" I exclaimed.

He drew three tedious puffs through his nose. "My friend," he said, "once you are at Dresden, it will be well not to talk so loud when you enjoy a *tête-à-tête* with a pretty young woman in a corridor."

I positively jumped. "In Dresden! What do you mean?"

"Yes, in Dresden," he repeated provokingly. "In Dresden the walls, as well as the men and women, have ears."

"And how," I demanded, sullenly, "how do you know that I am going to Dresden?"

"Accident, I suppose." His eyes danced with malicious pleasure.

"No, no, Herr Graf, it was not by accident."

"Very good; it was not by accident. Have a little patience, my student. I did not forget my duty, and the Burgundy awaits our last carouse in my chamber. Youder there is less chance of our being interrupted by my Lord Bengt, who, I may remark, is dutifully spending the evening with his cousin, the Fröken Countess." The saucy grin which he threw at me would have tried the temper of an angel.

"I do not come," I said firmly, "until you have told me how you discovered I am going to Dresden."

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Whereupon he shut the door and put his tongue in his cheek. "Really, very simply," he answered. "You took off your coat in a pet,—out drops a letter. I observe it is addressed in the writing of Madam the Fru Countess for the hands of my noble friend, Count Karl, now residing at Dresden, and is to be delivered by my excellent friend, M. Martin. Permit me to restore it to you."

His grave bow melted into a gay laugh, and I was obliged to laugh too. After all, my dear mother was right when she said, "Hughie's fingers are all thumbs for everything but books and a pen."

The Graf was watching me narrowly. "Never mind, my bookworm," he remarked, cheerfully. "I won't peach. God bless my soul! As a young man I have been guilty of worse follies. You did not have to fight to get your letter back; I did. *Ja! Ja!* I did, and the lady was worth it. She had eyes and a smile, pouf! she was as feather-headed as myself," he sighed. "Ah! she must be older and wiser now, more 's the pity. Thirty years ago, heigho!"

And presently, when I, too, had drunk a glass of Greta's Burgundy, as he called it, the black shadows on the horizon began to lift.

"Herr Graf," I asked, tremulously, "did—did you hear all that—that was said in the corridor?"

"How can I say? I heard a very pretty confession. But why did you not allow the wench to finish? Always hear a woman out, my student, for the best part comes last. Remember for another time." He chuckled.

"Is what Greta said," I burst out, "so very plain?"

"Oh! that 's the mischief, is it? No, I don't think it is so very plain, on my honour, I do not. Remember, a woman's eyes are ten times quicker than a man's to—" he snapped his fingers airily. "Women are—are jealous of each other, damnably jealous, and Greta has been watching you for two years. Why, I am in love with the Fröken Countess myself."

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"You, Herr Graf!" I could have thumped him.

"Oh! I mean it, 'pon my soul I do. Your pupil is a lady such—ah! I wish to God I had never come to Polenstjerna."

He had forgotten my presence and sat staring at the red wine sparkling so comfortably in its beaker. "I have a good mind," he muttered, "to accompany you to Dresden and to—" he sprang up and paced to and fro.

"I wish, indeed, you would come with me," I said, ruefully.

"And what is to be your work at Dresden?" he inquired, stopping sharply.

As I flinched under his piercing gaze a wild desire to confess all seized me, and I mastered it with difficulty. "Surely, Graf," I replied awkwardly, "*you* have no need to put that question."

"I am not so sure." He tossed off the remainder of his glass. "Bah!" he said, "I did not invite you here to pry into your affairs. No, I desire to prove my respect by offering you some advice. I know Dresden better than most. It is a curious city—a very curious city."

Light as his tone was it froze my marrow.

"Shall you lodge at an inn?" he demanded abruptly.

I nodded. "Then I can tell you the very place. It is right in the centre of the town and is called 'The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg.'"

The coincidence was more than interesting. "It is," I observed, carelessly, "the chief inn, I suppose."

He laughed the laugh of a man whose memory is beginning to work. "*Herr Gott!* no. The beds are good,"—he smiled,—"*the wine is good—no, it is the best in Dresden. There are other inns larger, finer, more thronged, but,*" he paused to lick his lips, "*they do not own Fräulein Kätchen.*"

"Fräulein Kätchen?" The Fru Countess had not thought fit to speak of her.

"To be sure, Fräulein Kätchen, the mistress of 'The

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Trumpeter of the 'Taschenberg,' and, my student," he added, leaning across the table to wag an earnest finger, "you will do well to make a friend of Fräulein Kätchen. She knows all that is going on in Dresden and a good deal else besides,—oh! a most rare woman! Yes, make her your friend—if you can."

"If I can? Is she old or young, Graf?"

"Faith! a proper question, but on my honour I cannot answer it. Fräulein Kätchen is—Fräulein Kätchen. She is a woman; therefore a man—a young man—ought to be able to make her his friend; for I would have you know the hock of Fräulein Kätchen is nectar. It slips down the throat as flattery sinks into a young man's mind. Yes, it is good, but her Burgundy, *Herr Gott!* is liquor only for a king or a king's mistress to quench their voluptuous thirst with." He laughed long and low. But why should he laugh at the thought of Burgundy in "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg"? "*Also*, my bookworm, wheedle, if you can, a pint of that Burgundy from its owner and it will make you gay even as his Majesty Augustus the Strong."

"And supposing she will not be my friend?"

"Go on trying. There is only one person in Dresden better worth the effort, and that, of course, is his Excellency General Flemming."

I stirred uneasily. "Is he, too, a friend of yours?"

The question set him chuckling for two minutes. "To be sure. We are all friends with so mighty a man. And you must be a friend, too."

"I?" Was he about to tell me of the Countess's packet?

"Of course. A young man visiting Dresden should have a proper introduction to his Excellency. Else he would miss a masterpiece of God's work polished up by—the Devil." He took a pinch of snuff. "Permit me, therefore, to offer you one."

I was triumphant. The Graf did *not* know that I was

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already provided. He had *not* discovered my secret. M. Martin was not such a precious fool after all.. Meanwhile he had risen. Great heavens ! he had taken from a drawer a packet. My heart crawled into my shoes. Another packet !

“ I assure you,” he said, with the utmost gravity, “ no better introduction to his Excellency than this packet could be given you by anyone. Promise me you will deliver it yourself, and on no pretence whatsoever give it to anyone else.”

“ Tell me first,” I said boldly, “ what it contains.”

“ I am sorry,” he answered slowly, “ but I cannot. It is connected with the business of his Majesty, I may even say with the affairs of this family ; more I dare not ; but if you would do them and me a favour you will be silent, secret as the grave.”

The truth was pouring into my mind. The Graf was here on the business of Count Karl ; the King of Sweden was concerned ; was his consent not necessary ? The Saxon Court was concerned, for were there not Polish estates and a matter of religion at issue ? My Lady was concerned. For aught I knew, I might be carrying her fate in my hands.

“ I promise,” I said, calmly, taking the packet and noting quickly that it was the exact counterpart to the one already in my keeping, sealed with the same seals, and not a syllable of writing on the cover. The unholy joy bubbled up more triumphantly. They sneered at my books, but, after all, much reading in books does teach a man something.

“ You are a queer fellow,” the Graf observed ; “ an hour ago you were in the dumps and now I could swear you are hungering to be at Dresden.”

“ Perhaps so,” I answered, smiling. “ I am wondering what General Flemming will say when he sees me.”

He laughed that long, low, creepy laugh, and I laughed too. I had two packets,—ignorant M. Martin had two packets !

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"Tell him the truth, for God's sake, my bookworm," he urged. "He won't believe you : no matter. He will like you all the better when he finds it is the truth. *Allmächtiger Gott!* if there's one thing he hates, it is a young man who lies, because he does it so damnably well himself." Down went a glass of Burgundy at a gulp. As with the Fru Countess a weight had been lifted from his mind.

"Should you have any difficulty," he remarked thoughtfully, "in seeing the great man, ask Fräulein Kätchen and——"

"What ! a woman ? and I am to be silent as the grave !"

"She is not like other women," he chuckled, "and she will like you all the more for asking."

"Is she, too, in the secret ?" I asked innocently.

"Secret ? What secret ?" He was quite perturbed, and I smiled in naughty delight.

"The secret"—I almost winked—"of this king's business."

"Oh, that !" he had recovered his equanimity. "There is no such great secret. It is only a little matter to be arranged in a friendly way. I could explain it in five minutes, but"—he did wink—"it is not my affair, you see."

"Why, then, confide in Fräulein Kätchen ?" I persisted from a wicked desire to tease him.

"Because she knows how to arrange things for her friends and mine. But, as you value your skin, don't try any liberties with her, else one fine morning your carcase will be found in some dirty corner with a long knife between your ribs."

"Good heavens ! Herr Graf," I protested, trembling with fear and indignation, "I hope,—I am sure I would not try liberties with any woman."

But he only laughed. "Perhaps not. Yet stranger things have happened in Dresden. The air is intoxicating, and young blood will be hot even though it has been chilled for six-and-twenty years between the covers of dusty folios."

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I had no longer any desire to tease. The old fears flitted about me. I strove to frame a picture of this strange Fräulein, young, cunning, comely, stiff, reserved, proud, very much the mistress of her hostelry. Young ! she could hardly be young if she were so important ; middle-aged, rather, a woman who once had been pretty and insisted on being considered pretty still. I devoutly hoped so. With a woman of middle age, however vain, I could by trying hard behave without offending ; but how on earth was I to treat a young woman, I, who had in my life spoken perhaps no more than a dozen times to such ? Heaven indeed save me from that mystery, a young woman !

The Graf was puffing thoughtfully at his pipe. “ You do not inquire about Dresden,” he remarked,—“ Dresden, where, everyone agrees, the Court is peculiar.”

“ In every court,” I said, practising discretion, “ there must be some bad people.”

“ Exactly,” he said dryly. “ You will be surprised, then, to hear that at Dresden the Court has no bad people, people who in other courts would confess they are bad.” He rubbed his hands. “ No ! they are all good and bad, good in their own eyes, bad in the eyes of everyone else. Cheat the king of his money, steal your neighbour’s mistress, wink at your wife’s friendships,—alas ! you do these things not because you are wicked, but because you live in a dirty court surrounded by dirty people.”

“ I would rather not hear of such things,” I said hurriedly ; “ tell me about the King.”

“ The King, *Herr Gott !* ” he choked. “ Was there ever such a king ? He has the body of a Hercules, the taste of a Mæcenæ, and the morals of a *fille de joie*. Kings, my bookworm, are entitled to double the privileges of their subjects. This noble monarch quadruples them. If the Grossstallmeister has one mistress, he must have four ; if the Treasurer owes half a million, he must owe two millions, and so on ; and why ? because he has such scoundrels around him.

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Voilà ! Poor King ! He is a most affable, dignified, courteous prince, and he will ravish your heart with his smile. But do not forget, his royal heart is as cold and hard as the marble Venus on the Terrace. He is a princely master to serve, who will throw you into a dungeon with the same splendid grace with which he permits you to plunder his privy purse."

"I hope," I said, fervently, "that I shall not see him."

"Pouf ! Fiddlestick ! what ! visit Dresden and not see the most charming person in it ! Tell his Excellency the truth and you will leave Dresden enchanted with his Majesty, and with your pockets fatter than when you entered. God ! if I were only young again !"

Every word blackened the shadows lying across my path.

"The Fru Countess," I said, timidly, "spoke to me of—of a kinswoman, the Princess Rapierska. Do—are you acquainted with her ?"

All unwitting I had touched a dangerous topic. "And, pray, what did Madam have to say ?" he demanded sharply, as if he had a right to know.

"Very little. She had heard she was a great beauty."

His fingers drummed feebly on the table. "My friend," he asked, "has my Lord Bengt been talking to you of Dresden ?" and he peered into my face as if he would drag forth my inmost soul.

My Lord Bengt ! Good God ! My Lord Bengt ! Was my Lord Bengt a conspirator, that everyone feared and suspected him ? "What," I demanded, "has he to do with the Princess Rapierska ?"

He sank back in his chair, much relieved. "Nothing, nothing," he muttered, "save that the Princess is his cousin, too."

But I was not to be fobbed off with this lame, nay, puerile, explanation.

The Graf was smiling imperturbably. "You are burning with curiosity," he said. "Can you not guess why Madam

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told you the Princess was a great beauty? Where are your wits?"

"Count Karl?" I cried, quivering with excitement.

"Precisely." His tone was solemnity itself.

"But she is married already?" I only guessed this.

"*Du Lieber Gott!* In Dresden, my friend, *that* is no obstacle."

"And she is a Roman Catholic?"

"There's no denying it."

"And she would be divorced and he would marry her? For God's sake——"

"Such things have happened before."

I stared at him and he stared at me. I loathed myself; I loathed him; I loathed Count Karl; above all, I loathed the Princess Rapierska.

"Oh! what am I to do?" I moaned helplessly.

He pursed up his lips, took a pinch of snuff, whistled softly. "My bookworm," he said earnestly, "you must persuade him to come back to Polenstjerna at once."

"I?" They all expected this from me. It was preposterous.

"Yes, you! Come he must. You must pull him out by the ears and send him packing home." He was growing quite excited.

"Oh! it is infamous. Why cannot the Princess——"

"The Princess!" he whistled. "Ah! my student, when you have been a week in Dresden you will talk differently. It is not easy for a man to keep himself free, but it's damnably difficult for a woman. She is honest,—I hope so,—but pouf!" His voice became cold. "The affairs of the Princess are not mine. I am not her keeper. Count Karl is my friend, and it is your task to save him. I see things in another light, now I am here. Get him home and all may yet be right."

His words poured out rapidly. He had lost mastery of

himself. But what could he mean — “All may yet be right” ? A twitching in my throat choked me.

“I do not understand,” I said, wiping my brow furtively.

He was once more the cool, experienced man of the world.

“I mean exactly what I say. Count Karl at present is being ruined by the women of Dresden.”

And I was to help in foisting a young man, ruined by the women of Dresden, on my Lady. Well, we should see !

“He is a gallant lad,” he burst out, enthusiastically, “a true friend. He is worth saving, so promise me you will do your best.” He put his hand on my arm. “Promise,” he pleaded, “and you will do the Fröken Countess, whom God knows we both honour, a better service than you wot of.”

Sincerity rang in his voice, sincerity shone in his kindly eyes, as he paced up and down in troubled thought.

“There !” he cried, “I will not ask you to promise. Go to Dresden, see for yourself, and, if you can, send me back my friend, Count Karl Polenstjerna.”

I would have answered this touching mark of confidence, but he made a passionate gesture for silence. We sat in silence for some few minutes.

Had I really divined the meaning of this family affair ? Every word confirmed my interpretation, and yet,—and yet,—strive as I might, it was the face of my Lord Bengt which menaced me on every side. Could it be—I ground my teeth—that something was in train of which my Lady was ignorant, something which had reared its evil head at the coming of the Graf ? Oh ! it was impossible ; quite impossible. But if it should be—should be—I clenched my fists impotently.

My painful reverie was broken by the Graf. “Be wise,” he said ; “don’t puzzle your head any further. Go to Dresden, enjoy yourself, do as you have promised, and all will be right.”

“It is no use puzzling,” I muttered bitterly.

“Very good, then, don’t do it. The motto for the young

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man is, 'Wait upon events.' So wait, M. Martin, and when that jade, Fortune, is yielding take her to your arms. The times are such—but I have said enough about that."

I thanked him. I was grateful, for all the faintness of my heart and the sickness of my spirit.

"One more word. Be on your guard"—he cocked up his brows—"against the women."

"The ladies of Dresden are adorable," he pursued, unabashed by my indignation, "yes, adorable. Should his Excellency take a fancy to you, you will be petted as you have never been petted in your life, not even by your mother. Be on your guard, and for God's sake keep clear of any woman in whom the King or his Excell——"

"Graf!" I cried.

"Tut, tut!" He took a pinch of snuff. "You must not say a word against women. In every place, were it not for the women, bless them! man could not achieve the impossible. If you are in doubt ask Fräulein Kätchen."

"This is too much," I protested, hotly.

"Not a bit. Keep your own eyes open and do not be above a hint,—it will be a broad one"—he grinned—"from Fräulein Kätchen. And, by the way, she has a few idols who are sacred, and the chief of them is"—he pursed up his lips—"is—the Princess Rapierska."

He began to prattle glibly about half a dozen trumpery trifles,—roads and horses, and goodness knows what else,—and it was not till midnight that he permitted me to withdraw.

"Watch," were his last words; "watch and hold your tongue."

"Yes," I answered grimly, "I mean to watch and keep my own counsel."

"Then," he cried, with his sublime gaiety, "then, we shall meet again."

A wild whim seized me. I stole down the back staircase *and* groped my way to the great hall. The noble apart-

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ment lay before me silent, lapped in the divine radiance of the harvest moon. In through the emblazoned windows facing me poured the magic light, welcomed so proudly by the escutcheon of the Polenstjerna. It burnished anew with an unearthly glory lifeless casque, corselet, and sword ; it cast a fresh halo on the tattered flags and the drums that had beat in Dresden, and framed in laurels of its own magic weaving the grim warriors whose work was done. "*Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !*"

I stood entranced, hardly breathing lest I should break the spell. The night was deathly still ; not so much as a sigh of the wind whispering of sleep and love to the roses and goddesses on the Terrace marred the crisp fragrance of summer which heralds the swift approach of chill autumn, and the silvery finger of the first frosts. One felt rather than heard the dreamy murmurs of the dark Baltic heaving in sluggish slumber towards the western rocks. And it was with a throbbing heart that I turned to pay homage to the vision I had come to see. Ah ! there she was, the White Countess, queening all her race, claiming their reverent devotion and mine by the sovereign prerogative of her incomparable womanhood. The moon's wizardry had kissed away the mystery of brooding sorrow, leaving her tender, gracious, and true, a mistress, ah yes ! for whom it had been an honour to live, and a privilege to die.

I stepped up to the window and sat down with bowed head and sore, sore thoughts. I was leaving her — leaving my pupil, in whom her spirit and her womanhood blossomed anew.

Perhaps I drowsed, for with a faint shiver I started up. The hall had become dark ; the light was blotted out. A black cloud veiled the radiant moon. Half asleep I rubbed my eyes and peered into the night. I could just see away there on the left King Eric's Tower, grim, gaunt, defiant in its pale of cold, murky shadows. God ! what was that ? My heart gave one tremendous beat and stopped. Through

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the narrow windows of that ghostly keep had flashed a red light. Greta's words, my Lady's stories, hurled themselves into my brain and conspired to smite my quivering senses. I was seized with a mighty fear. The lights of the White Countess ! Dear God ! there it was again — red, unearthly red, and bright ! The lights of the White Countess ! And I was here with her alone !

With a cry I had flung myself from the hall, I was running like one mad, nor did I stop until the door of my chamber was locked fast.





CHAPTER VI

THE RIDDARHOLM CHURCH

WHY is it that mornings of a good-bye are always the finest of the year? My last day at Polenstjerna had come, and never had the castle breathed such enchantment as on this superb August forenoon. Even King Eric's Tower threw off its tragic sternness and recalled only the tender romance of far-off things which hallowed its weather-beaten stones.

I sought the Terrace, sought from the bloom of the roses amidst the dainty walks and stately parterres the repose which noble gardens never refuse to those who seek it in joyful humbleness of spirit. And once again the old charm held me in its resistless sway. The salt air of the Baltic blew with healing in its wings; and before its breath fled all the foolish fears of the night, all the black doubts of the future. They vanished like an evil dream, and I wandered back into the happy, happy hours which made these gardens as beautiful and sacred as the golden gardens of the Hesperides.

This way and that I roamed, giving rein to my memory. Here I could pay adieu to a statue in whose shade I had meditated on the mysteries of man's fate; yonder was the clipped yew which had listened to a careless lesson while Greta wondered what it was which made the Herr Tutor so faltering of speech, and hard by was the leafy arbour where I had been taught the history of Sweden and had thrilled

at my Lady's eyes when she sang me the ballad of the routing of the Dane at Brunkeberg :

*"Sa körde de Danska ur Sverige
Falivilom !"*

All—all were her haunts, and she had made them mine. They were fragrant everywhere and always of her presence. I looked up and there she was, as she should be.

There is surely no pleasanter sight than the vision of a man and a woman walking in a sunny garden, walking as the first man and woman on this earth with hearts that knew no guile in the Paradise of God. And happy beyond the lot of mortals was my Lord Bengt when his cousin dared not meet his eyes. My Lady raised the fan at her girdle and beckoned.

"Ah," she said, graciously, "I believe that M. Martin will be sorrier to say good-bye to the gardens of Polenstjerna than to anything else."

"M. Martin will return, I trust," my Lord remarked, kindly.

"Oh, no!"—she threw up her chin, saucily—"M. Martin has been invited, but——"

"My duty is accomplished," I stammered.

"When duty is done," quoth my Lord, quietly, "pleasure should begin. Do not the philosophers say that, Monsieur Tutor?"

"Perhaps, Herr Grefve, but the philosophers are not always right."

My Lady clapped her hands. "Fie!" she cried, "oh! fie! You must not undo all that you have taught your pupil. A philosopher can never be wrong."

"Does that prove, Countess, that he is always right?"

"My cousin must answer you. You, sir, have taught me it is only a man who can argue."

"The pupil," she continued, in the same light tone, "has a confession to make. Bengt—" she smiled, pleadingly, and

for the second time my mistress and I were alone together, and no one but the roses and the seagulls to hear.

She pushed at the gravel with the toe of her slipper. "Can you not guess," she inquired, glancing shyly from under her lashes, "what I desire to confess?"

"That you have learned very little, I fear." And then I bit my lip.

"No," she faced me daringly, "that your pupil is still afraid of you."

"Afraid!" My Lady was indeed pleased to be merry this morning.

"Yes, afraid. The first time I saw you I was afraid. I am so still. It was in this garden, too."

It was, and just such a summer day as this had smiled at a raw young bookworm, quaking in his shoes, conscious only of the blue eyes and golden hair of her niece at Madam's elbow.

"I would ask why, Countess," I said.

"Can a girl explain why she feels this or that? Not even a Countess can do so." She paused. "But it is because—because—I think you rather despise us."

"Madam!" I protested.

"It was not the right word. So let me say it is because you are English. Bengt tells me the English are very proud. I can believe it."

"Madam!" I protested a second time.

"Before you came I had another tutor. He never disapproved of anything, not even with his eyes. You"—she smiled—"you are too polite to speak, but——"

I was cruelly hurt; yet I could not defend myself, for it was partly true.

"I do not like it at the time," she pursued, "but I like it afterwards. Bengt likes it too. He maintains it shows you belong to a nation which is free as well as proud. A woman feels so many things that she never speaks of even to herself. If—if—, M. Martin, there is ever a daughter in

Polenstjerna she shall be taught by an English tutor, and I should wish him to be M. Martin or M. Martin's son."

In such kind fashion did my pupil innocently give me the *coup de grâce*.

"You must have good mothers in England," she murmured, almost to herself.

"I would fain believe, Madam, that mothers are good everywhere."

She walked forward slowly.

"I think," I said, humbly I trust, but with such firmness as I could command, "I have a right to know, Countess, why you are still afraid."

"I will tell you," she said, frankly; "I should always like to do what your eyes, not your words, tell me you approve. Too often I fear I am about to do something—no, I cannot tell you." She began to walk forward again.

Suddenly she turned. "Because," came the startling words, "I believe that you could make me do something I should hate. It would be right," she added, almost in **SCOTCH**

I gazed at her in bewildered fear.

"Have you forgotten," she whispered, "my message to Dresden? What if I forbid you, yes, forbid you, to deliver it?"

I drew a deep breath. "Well," she queried, impatiently stamping on the path, "have you no answer?"

"My duty, Madam, is to obey."

"Oh!" she threw up her head, pettishly, "oh, yes! your duty as tutor. But all M. Martin's thoughts are not a tutor's thoughts, and that is the real M. Martin, the M. Martin whom I fear. And now let us talk of something else, if you please." Once more she began to walk forward.

"But the message to Dresden, Countess?"

She plucked a rose hastily and smelled it for two minutes. "I was only jesting. You will do as you promised, will you not?"

I bowed in silence. My Lady had not been jesting. The deep passion in her averted eyes made it plain even to me who knew nothing of a woman's heart. Ah! my Lord Bengt had not been silent this fair summer morning. What was I to do? what was I to do?

"I, too, should like to travel to Dresden," she began, lightly. "It is hard to be a girl, cooped up in a castle all one's life."

My Lady in Dresden, where the Princess Rapierska resided! God forbid!

"Bengt may be right; pleasure may begin where duty ends. You may not find it, Monsieur Tutor, so easy to forsake Dresden for England."

"It may be so." I was reflecting that both Count Karl and I might have to stay in Dresden some time."

"What? You are really about to abandon the books and——"

"No," I said, with some bitterness. "I have no plans, for I am ignorant of what may happen at Dresden."

"M. Martin," unwittingly she had placed a hand on my arm, "tell me the truth. Would you rather not go to Dresden?"

"No, I desire to go to Dresden for many reasons," and it was the truth.

A second question in her eyes was promptly stifled; and so the moment which might have wrought a revolution slipped away, never to return.

"Have you ever seen the King?" she inquired. We were now tutor and pupil as on any other morning. I shook my head. "Ah! you must not leave Sweden without seeing his Majesty. I will ask my cousin, and he shall arrange. You would like that?"

"Nothing better. For you have taught me, Countess, what her kings have been to Sweden."

For answer she pushed back the ruffles at her wrist, revealing a bracelet with a large medallion for a clasp. "His

Majesty," she said, unclasping it, "his Majesty as heir to the throne. I wear it as a gift from the late King to my father. It reminds me of my duty."

It was a charming portrait of a young lad, blue-eyed and fair-haired, with a high forehead and a most extraordinarily resolute mouth and chin, a princely, gallant face set in a deep lace collar.

"I can hardly believe," I murmured, "those tales of mad frolics. This is not one surely who, for all the dukes of Schleswig-Holstein, would be guilty of such unkingly folly."

"Yet they are true," my Lady replied. "The King is a strange being, and the stories of his obstinacy surpass anything even you have read of. Poor King! his mother, our good Queen, died when he was seven years old. Much, surely, must be forgiven to the motherless."

"What kind of king will he be, Madam?" I asked, hastily.

"Ah! that is the question. His Majesty baffles the wisest at Stockholm. He listens in silence to what is said, and he broods for hours, but no one can guess about what. Once I had the honour of talking to him, talking," she laughed merrily; "his Majesty said nothing, stared at the hem of my gown for a long while, bowed, and then stalked away. Those about the Court will tell you that he has three and only three passions: hunting bears, drilling soldiers, and telling the truth."

What a contrast to that King at Dresden!

"Would you be surprised, Monsieur Tutor," she said, with the sauciness of the quality, "to hear that you resemble King Charles in two things?"

I waited patiently. "He likes to have his own way," came the naughty answer, "and he cannot endure the society of ladies for long."

My Lady enjoyed my cruel discomfiture, emphasising it with the demurest curtsey imaginable.

"I hope, Madam," I said, "that you are as unjust to his Majesty as you are to myself."

“Unjust ! *Mon Dieu !* were I a king I would be as King Charles and M. Martin. I would have my own way.”

“One need not be a king or a tutor to wish and obtain that.”

She laughed gaily. “M. Martin speaks with good truth. Women are poor creatures, and were I a man I would not have the patience”—she shook her curls at me—“to endure their tantrums and their pets. No, indeed ! I would prefer the bears to all the ladies in the world. Better far to lie out in the snow spear in hand, or in the trench with your sword, than to be dangling beside all the idle petticoats in a salon, eh, Monsieur Tutor ?”

“I have known,” I replied, gravely, “but two ladies in my life, and there is no time when I would not gladly be at their mercy. I cannot say that of any man.”

“And who may these two wonderful women be ?”

“My mother was one, Madam.” It was true. My mother was born a gentlewoman.

“And the other ?” she asked, half indifferently, half eagerly.

“I must ask you to guess the other, Countess.”

She looked up quickly ; suddenly her colour rose, and a flash fell on the sun-dial. The Polenstjerna in her face made me tremble.

“I thank you,” she replied, with a deep and composed salute ; “some day, M. Martin, I hope you will be able to add a third.”

Then she walked away swiftly towards the Terrace where my Lord Bengt was patiently awaiting us. And as I slunk after her I felt as miserable as the house-dog that is put out of the room because it barks when it has been petted.

“Is the confession over ?” my Lord inquired, with a twinkle of decorous merriment.

“Yes,” and a gracious smile sweetened the remark. “M. Martin and I have discovered that confessions are not always very pleasant.”

Her smile proclaimed that my impertinence was already forgiven, say, rather, forgotten. After all, what did it matter to the Countess Polenstjerna whether M. Martin meant what he had said?

My Lord was inspecting us both tranquilly, but narrowly.

“How curious!” he remarked, courteously, when the boon had been asked, “but as I sat here the same idea occurred to me. It would indeed be a pity for M. Martin to leave Sweden without seeing your master and mine, Ebba.”

Now I could have sworn that the idea had only entered his head after he had studied my Lady’s face and mine. Courteous my Lord always must be, for your true gentleman is courteous to a dog, not because it is a dog, but because he himself is so much better than a dog. Yet during all these two years he had shown, as at this moment, not courtesy, but deep interest, and that no tutor has a right to expect from any gentleman.

“Desiring to see the King,” he resumed, with his rare smile, “is one thing, seeing him is another. His Majesty requires to be stalked as cunningly as the shyest and most dangerous of bears. However, if M. Martin will do me the pleasure of coming to the palace on the Riddarholm early to-morrow, he shall see the King if he can be seen. Till then, Monsieur Tutor, adieu!”

The favour had been granted to my Lady, but to-morrow M. Martin would talk with my Lord. Of that I felt absolutely certain, and it disturbed me not a little. Perhaps he, too, would give me a message and a packet for Dresden.

Two hours later Polenstjerna Castle lay behind the saddle of the horse that carried me to Stockholm.

Yet as I ambled along I thought only of King Charles; and it was because the King was Stockholm and Stockholm was the King, that my thoughts were absorbed in his mysterious person.

My Lord Bengt, I knew, was not of those who thought

that his Majesty showed no capacity for rule; that he did nothing but drill soldiers, kill horses in desperate rides which nearly killed those who accompanied him, or sit in fits of stupefied silence till men agreed he must be bereft of his wits. The King, no one could deny, was silent; he was also guilty of mad pranks, but ever since the memorable day of his coronation when he had appalled the nobles by causing the Estates to swear their allegiance before the coronation; when he had assumed the crown before being anointed by the Archbishop of Upsala; when he had omitted his own oath, it was clear that this boy of fifteen meant to be master in his own house. The nobles had upset his father's will, had prevailed on the Estates to declare him of age when his father was scarcely cold in his grave, and had made him absolute. To the petition of the nobles for the cessation of the "Reduction," the reply had been a curt refusal; and their disgust had grown to indignant excitement when it was bruited abroad that the Chancellor, my Lord Oxenstjerna, had been sharply reprimanded; nay, worse, two of the nobles of great influence at his Majesty's accession, Counts Vrede and Bjelke, had been virtually dismissed; Count Bjelke had been actually arrested and a process instituted against him. Nor was the anger of the nobles exactly appeased by the rapid rise of two new men, "low-born" the Fru Countess had fiercely called them, who were ennobled and now, as Counts Piper and Polus, seemed to bear all the sway. True, it was whispered that in all this his Majesty had simply followed the secret instructions left him in a sealed packet by his father; but that was little comfort, and grey heads already muttered that the new King would act on the counsel of the young men and would scourge his subjects, not with the whips of his late Majesty, but with scorpions of his own. Was not his little finger already thicker than his father's loins? There were factions at Court: the party of the Queen-Mother, the French party, the Danish, the Anti-French, and the Anti-Danish. And the one problem which



silenced all the rest was the question, What would the King do in the matter of Schleswig-Holstein? The King of Denmark was asserting serious claims, not for the first time. King Charles loved his cousin the Duke as a brother; had they not scandalised Stockholm together by their wild ways eighteen months ago, "The Holstein Frenzy," as men called it? The Stockholmers still chattered of seeing their sovereign and his cousin riding on one horse in their shirts, or tempering their swords on the heads of sheep and calves in the courtyard of the palace. Then had followed gay revelries: balls and masquerades, fêtes and plays by a French company of players, such extravagance as must have caused the late thrifty King to turn in his grave in horror; and it had all wound up with the marriage of the Duke with the King's sister, the Princess Hedwig Sophia, whom he loved better than any one else. Surely, then, his Majesty was doubly pledged to draw the sword in that Duke's cause, even if he was not bound by his father's solemn engagements. The months drifted by; the King of Denmark showed no signs of yielding; report averred he was secretly arming, and now in July in this year of grace, 1699, the Duke had hurriedly returned to Sweden. Despite the warnings of the aged Count Oxenstjerna, the chief command of the Swedish troops in Pomerania was conferred upon him; despite the rebukes of his Majesty of France and of the "Sea Powers," my own country and Holland, Swedish troops were sent to Holstein. The gauntlet had been thrown down; and the cabinets of Europe were in a fever to see whether the King of Denmark would take it up. At Versailles, at St. James's, at Vienna, at The Hague, the eyes of statesmen were fixed on a dying, childless, idiot King at Madrid; night and day the brains of the men who ruled were toiling, plotting, scheming, writing, to avert the appeal to the sword over the heritage of the Hapsburgs, but if war broke out in the North by the obstinacy of one prince and the presumption of another, nothing could prevent the flames from spreading; once again,

as already in my lifetime, the fields of the Low Countries would run blood, and the Lilies of France would bid defiance along the vineyards of the Rhine and the corn-fields of Lombardy. Stay! one device might arrest the hand of King Charles. He was now seventeen; why should he not marry a Danish princess as his father had done, and let the wedding bells ring in the place of the blast of trumpets? But the match-makers were in despair. Not even the sharpest eye could detect that his Majesty was even aware of the difference to a young man between a maiden and a matron. To young women and old alike he was frostily polite, icily silent—he was bored, bored, ye gods! And all the time the Swedes were drilling and the Danes cutting trenches.

For two years I had lived at Polenstjerna cabined in my books, but at last the Graf had come, and in those gay, chattering confidences over the Burgundy of the Herr Grefve of blessed memory, had lifted the curtain, had pushed me, dragged me, cajoled me into a knowledge which left me aghast. Sweden stood at the parting of the ways; and the choice of road lay with a lad of seventeen, obstinate, silent, brooding, who kept his own counsel and never revealed his decision till it was in the way of execution.

“I have seen this King,” the Graf had said, “more than once, and God knows what he will do. I am not easily baffled, but *Allmächtiger!* he has baffled me. He is either a madman or the greatest young man in Europe. I would not be in that King’s shoes,” he would wind up gravely, “for only too many of the nobles are pining to cut his claws; and if I were one of the ‘Reduced’ I would be of their number. His Majesty must either tame them or they will tame him.”

“And which is the more likely?” I had inquired.

“Ah! I am not a prophet, but were I King Charles, I would fight the Dane and set the discontented on glutting their swords in the bowels of the enemy. Nothing cures

bad blood at home like a good dose of blood-letting in foreigners." And so, with an injunction to keep my student's eyes open, the Graf would conclude his lesson for the day.

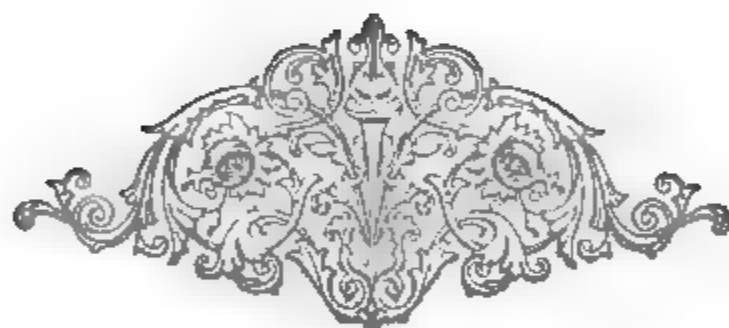
It was late afternoon when I found myself looking down on the capital of Sweden. The Fru Countess had hired a lodging for me at the foot of the Brunkeberg not far from the Church of Saint Clara, but neither she nor my Lady had prepared me for the ethereal loveliness of the scene as I drew rein to ask my way. This—this before my dazed sight—this was not a city of men, a home of human beings; this was the abode of the immortal gods as dreamed of and sung by poets whose fancy had been touched and lips fired by the deathless spirits of the Dawn. Ah! if you could have seen it as I saw it then, in the peace and glory of a westering sun, you, too, would have taken off your hat and sat in the saddle entranced in breathless adoration. On one side spread the swelling bosom of Lake Mälär; on the other the dimpled arm of the sea spread out to embrace the Baltic, and between them fairies had thrown the island where throbbed the heart of Sweden. Gaze where you will, on every hand climbed up the wooded heights, smiling down at their reflections in the water spangled with elfin isles, while along the fretted shores of that enchanted mere clustered the red gables of the houses nestling among the trees. Here shot up a church spire, yonder peeped a stronghold of the olden time; above were posted the sentinel windmills flapping lazily, and down there stately ships were slowly beating out to sea. Over all floated and drifted a golden haze, decking the royal city as a priceless veil decks a bride for her bridal.

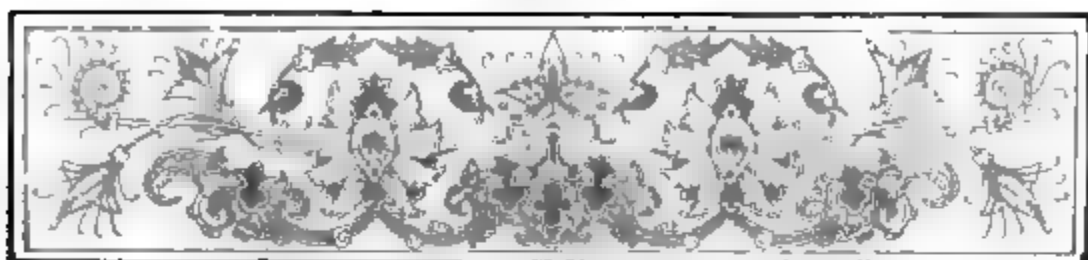
Alone at the Riddarholm was the stir and hum of human life, for there cargoes were being discharged, and men and women moved as if they were called to do other things than simply to enjoy the good things of God. But the eye left their restless farings to and fro, seeking the sylvan haunts of Djurgården, or upwards beyond the palace of Drottning-

holm, embowered in its princely pleasaunces of wood and water till the landscape melted into the silvery sheen and purple forests of the Mälar and faded into the glowing darkness of the Northern summer night.

I spent a happy hour staring as the countryman stares. English I might be, but to me the buildings were as eloquent of their storied message as those of my dear university on the banks of the sluggish Cam. It gave me a pang to see the workmen busy as honey bees on the foundations of the new palace which was to replace the one burnt down. Never, alas ! could I see the Great Gallery and the famous Tower of the Three Crowns. But all around me lay the houses of the mighty, whose history spelled the history of their land—Sparre, Wrangel, Banèr, Horn, Stenbock, Oxenstjerna. And to-morrow in my Lord Wrangel's house I must seek a Polenstjerna, as proud a name as any, for in that house his Majesty now lodged. I chose the gloaming as most fitting to pay my homage in the Riddarholm Church where, beneath a nation's pall of dusty drums and tattered standards, slept so many of his Majesty's ancestors. Before the tomb of the noblest of their house, the great Gustavus Adolphus, no true Englishman but would have stood with bowed head and a prayer of thankfulness on his lips. Ah yes! we English cannot, must not forget, that this King of an ice-bound land had fought his fight, and our fight too, for the Protestant Faith ; many a sword that had at Naseby and Marston Moor struck a blow for freedom and the sure mercies of our Crucified Lord had first learned the strength that God will give his servants beneath those bullet-ridden and triumphant banners of the Lion of the North. And some day the boy King's turn would come to sleep beside the kings, the marshals, and the soldiers of his people. In what guise would he be brought to his rest ? A king who had given his subjects peace and years of fatness ? or, as with the other Vasas, a warrior sovereign, over whose tomb would droop the spoils of his enemies, one more heroic memory to be enshrined with the laurels

of his race in the hearts of a nation linked by an immortal heritage in suffering and victory to the rulers of their land? Who could tell? The issues did not lie in our hands, but we, the young, should see. Ha! the Graf was right. It was good to be young to-day.





CHAPTER VII

THE PHILOSOPHY OF A CAPTAIN OF TRABANTS

A MESSAGE from my Lord Bengt next morning made me happy. His Majesty, he informed me, had promised to receive the French Envoy in private audience at two o'clock, and if I would present myself at the palace he, the captain of the guard, would undertake that I saw the King. Later on, my Lord, of his courtesy, and mindful of the gratitude to be won from a pair of blue eyes at Polenstjerna, begged the pleasure of my company at supper.

Thus left to myself, I wandered away from the noisy quays out towards the open ground beyond Carlsberg. Strolling as the humour led me, I was not altogether displeased that all unwittingly I had fallen on a body of Swedish soldiers busy at drill. Ludicrous as it may sound, nothing has ever been so potent of charm for my bookworm's eyes as the sight of soldiers. Not that I have ever been guilty of an ambition to handle a sword or trail a pike myself, still less to practise the exercises of the military art—far from it; but ever since I was a boy who knew *The Swedish Intelligencer* by heart, the sight of soldiers has always affected me with an exquisite pleasure, because, I suppose, most men in secret admire and covet the qualities which nature has sternly denied them. For some such reason few memories of the past thrill me so powerfully as recollecting how my father raised me, as a chit of a lad, on his shoulders to see his Majesty King Charles II. ride through Hyde Park escorted by a troop of his Life

Guards. Of my smiling, dark-browed sovereign, for all his blue ribbon and star, I remember naught; but those glorious red coats and burnished corselets, nodding plumes and prancing horses all round him stamped themselves into my youthful mind as a model of what a real soldier could and ought to be.

As I watched the Swedish soldiers I confessed to a grievous disappointment. Could these toil-worn peasants in faded blue coats be the soldiers of whom his late Majesty had been so inordinately proud, the men who had fought as a lioness bereft of her whelps at Halmstad and Lund? Were these the companions whom the boy King really preferred to the bright eyes and cheeks as of the May of the ladies of his Court? I looked and looked and trembled for the fate of Sweden on the brink of a bloody quarrel with the Dane. The best I could plead on their behalf was that they were very much in earnest. But they left my blood quite unstirred, even when a regiment of cavalry charged at a swift gallop. Alas! they showed no sign of knowing that they ought to be striking pity and terror into the spectator. They charged as they manœuvred, much in the way in which I am wont to grapple with my Aristotle on a warm day. Pouf! there is a task to be performed; I have been shown how to do it; let me take my coat off and be as speedy as I can. There! it was not so disagreeable as I had thought, and now I will have a few puffs of tobacco before I begin again. I recalled my glorious Life Guards, and sighed.

Two officers rode up and drew rein a few yards distant from my coign of vantage: one of them was a grizzled warrior who at once made me feel pleasantly warm and fierce; the other was younger, a short but exceedingly well-built figure of a man, simply, almost poorly dressed, yet with such a lively spirit in his clear eyes, particularly when he glanced at the troops, that I quite longed for him to order me to do something desperate and bloody. Suddenly another man dashed up on a smoking horse, very nearly riding over my

bright-eyed soldier. But he showed no resentment ; no, in a trice he had humbly whipped off his hat. Heavens ! the newcomer was the King ! One minute he paused, and then the three rode off together.

For a long time I stood dazed, hat in hand. I had lost all my interest in the troops, in the officer with the radiance of unquenchable spirit in his face. Had I been told that it was Major-General Rehnskjöld I should not have heeded, for his were human eyes. But those others ! A pair of dark blue eyes, steely cold, mysterious as the light of a diamond or the stars on a frosty night, eyes which pierced to the marrow and told you nothing ! Ah ! have you ever stared on a summer's day into the pure, cold deeps of a sunlit tarn, and wondered what lay down, down beneath the glassy sheen so perfectly unruffled by your curiosity ? then you would have a glimmering of what I had felt — what still tingled in my finger-tips.

When I approached the palace a second time I was surprised to observe that my Lord had doffed all his finery and now wore nothing but the plainest of plain blue coats and hats.

Indeed, my Lord looked, for all the world, like the soldiers whom I had sighed over a couple of hours before ; and it just flashed on me that perhaps a man in a blue coat might be able to hold his own and better, against the silk and lace of the *Maison du Roi*, or on counterscarps waist-high in corpses.

“Ah ! M. Martin,” he proceeded, misreading my thoughts, “you must not expect too much of our humble Court. My master would not compete with St. James's or Versailles. Could he have his own way he would receive an ambassador on horseback, or rather,” he laughed, “not receive him at all. Depend upon it, he is doing it in a jest to-day. His Majesty has a fine sense of humour.”

As he talked, he had conducted me through the gallery to the antechamber, off which opened the room in which the Envoy would have audience. Both gallery and antechamber

had a fair sprinkling of gentlemen, and every minute brought a fresh arrival. Here and there the dress was a copy of my Lord's, but the majority, the younger men in particular, were as gaily attired as my rude ideas of a court had pictured. The quality, then, not without reason, smiled and stared and winked at the awkward stranger in his brown cloth, who was torn between a clownish curiosity and a wholesome fear.

The hum of conversation, the rattle of snuff-boxes, the click of high heels, or the tat-tap of scabbards on the polished floor made me listless. I drew a little volume from my pocket, read a page or two, and then closed it, for my thoughts were happier than any book's. I was on the Terrace at Polenstjerna in the golden glow of afternoon ; down there strolled my Lady, swinging her hat by the ribbons, fancy free ; over everything lay the drowsy spell of summer, and mingled with it, floating round the trim parterres and the sun-soaked statues, murmured the tireless lullaby of the fountains. And yonder — yonder stretched the Baltic, infinite and blue.

Why did those crisp voices so perversely break my dreams ?

" It is impossible ! " said a sharp tongue, in dismay.

" No," was the earnest reply, " I assure you it is so. His Majesty gave the order at midday."

" Five thousand, did you say ? "

" Yes, five thousand. They will embark at Carlscrona at once. In six weeks they will — unless — " he shrugged his shoulders.

I glanced at their faces, sobered as I was sobered. Only one interpretation was possible. Swedish troops had been ordered for Schleswig-Holstein, and " unless " — well, a child or a bookworm could read what the shrug of the shoulders signified.

The frivolous tattle was rattling round me ; snuff-boxes were being shaken ; jests and quips being exchanged ; the gallery and anteroom clearly did not know what I knew. Then came two o'clock and a sudden stir, a drawing of

breath ; men straightened themselves, and smoothed their ruffles. Five minutes went by and nothing happened. Whispers flew from mouth to mouth, eyebrows were raised, councillors and senators shook their full-bottomed wigs. "The ambassador is here," whispered the young noble who had brought the news before; "but," a mischievous chuckle, "his Majesty is not. God knows, perhaps he is half way to Upsala or Carlsrona."

"And the Envoy?"

"Is sitting in his coach, at one moment ready to cry for laughing, at another to drive away in a huff."

The great man, I learned presently, was now closeted with the Chancellor and Count Piper, having refused to make a public entrance. For in these matters his mighty master at Versailles, as all the world is aware, does not display the virtues of a most Christian king. We yawned through another half-hour, and were about to leave in amused disgust when a blast from the royal trumpeters startled us, and before the blast had died away the clatter of heavy boots and the sharp ring of spurs echoed over the polished floor. His Majesty was striding into the anteroom. Why, he must have sprung up the stairs. Past us he strode like a whirlwind ; we had time hardly to uncover before he had come and gone, and something almost like a titter hissed behind the hats of those bowing low. *Du Lieber Gott!* as the Graf would have said, the King was just as I had seen him in the morning, save that his blue coat was dustier, his boots more soiled, his face the face of a trooper who had ridden hard. A trooper ! no, not quite ; for had the Envoy been blazing with jewels and bedecked with ribbons it would have been clear to the most boorish peasant which was king and which was subject. How young he looked as he carried his hat in the French fashion under his arm ! Yet that mouth and those eyes, so chillingly serene, proclaimed unmistakably that, boy though he was, he was not of the stuff which greybeards can mould to their

will. And that was how I saw King Charles XII. for the second time.

"Well, M. Martin," my Lord inquired, as he greeted me at his supper table, "his Majesty surprised you, I think! It would not be his Majesty if he did not surprise everyone. Even here in Stockholm we are not yet accustomed to him, though we always expect the unusual — and get it."

"Is there any other king in Europe like him?" I asked, impetuously.

My Lord shrugged his shoulders. "I can certainly say that he is very unlike the two kings I have seen, King Louis and King William."

"And yet," I protested, "my sovereign is not given to talking of his plans to his ministers."

The tinge of English bitterness provoked a smile. "So they said in London," he remarked, "but at least your King confides in those whom he trusts. In whom does my master confide?"

"You, Herr Grefve, might answer. How can I?"

"On the contrary, my dear sir, you know as much as I do,—or as little. The truth is that my master trusts none but himself. Perhaps he is wise." He smiled again.

Talk as the Graf might at Polenstjerna, he had failed to convince me; but now had my Lord said the opposite I should have refused to believe him. "His Majesty," he proceeded, still smiling, "was in a marvellously good humour. The ministers were delighted and the Envoy, too, for he actually spoke half a dozen sentences of French."

"Maybe," I said slowly, watching my Lord, "his Majesty's orders about the troops for Carlsrona had put him in a good temper."

Bengt put his knife down and searched my face.

"Upon my word, M. Martin," he answered with a mysterious laugh, "for a gentleman who professes to be ignorant of everything outside dusty folios you have an admirable skill in acquiring important information."

“ And you know, too ? ” I stammered.

My Lord was amused. “ Yes,” he answered, “ along with M. Martin, I happen to be one of the six persons in Stockholm in the secret ; well, because it is quite possible I may be one of the five thousand. But I confess I am curious as to how you learned.”

I told him the truth, and he meditated on it as if he suspected I had revealed only what suited my purpose.

“ You have hit the mark,” he resumed in his passionless way ; “ I do not imagine the meeting at the palace would have been so cordial had Monsieur from Versailles known what we know. Ah ! was I not right ? the King has a fine sense of humour.”

“ The news is serious ? ” I queried, uneasily.

“ More than serious,” was the grave reply, while a faint gleam lit up the dark eyes. Was there a Swede who could contemplate war with the Dane without the fire stealing into his veins ? Certainly not a Polenstjerna.

“ Perhaps,” I hazarded, “ King Louis and King William will interfere.”

“ They,” he said, deliberately, “ are not the only Powers who may interfere. Ah ! ” he smiled, “ I have not heard. I simply meant that your country and France are not the only countries which do not desire to see Sweden master of Schleswig by the sword. Kings, after all, are men ; we are apt to forget that. What,” he demanded with grave earnestness, yet without a trace of emotion, “ what are the two strongest passions in a man ? Ambition and revenge. Yes, ambition and revenge. And what is statecraft, true statecraft ? Surely this—the art of treating the affairs of a kingdom as if they were the affairs of an individual. If I were to act in the ordinary affairs of life on the principle that other men are not as I am, I should be ruined. So it is with rulers. Is it not so, M. Martin ? ”

“ But, Herr Grefve,” I rejoined with no little warmth, “ ambition and revenge are not the only passions which

govern men's hearts. Nor are all men the same, else M. Martin had been a soldier and the Grefve Polenstjerna a tutor."

"I agree," he replied, quickly. "In men and women ambition and revenge are linked with a third passion, more potent than these two, and that is love, yes, love in all its wonderful forms. In these three I am convinced you have the passions which control and direct the actions of ninety-nine men out of a hundred, and the hundredth is a madman whom we need not reckon."

"Aye," he continued, with the same bloodless deliberation, "fear, malice, envy, hate, generosity, courage,—they are all the children of ambition, love, and revenge, many of them miserable bastards, but strip off the mask and you discover the parent passion which begot them." He rose and folded up his napkin. "Let us," he said, "come back to our ruler. Men say kings have made war from love, ungratified love for some woman. It is absurd. There never was a Helen of Troy and there never will be. And mark the result. Ambition and revenge are stronger far in the ruler than in the individual man, because love—the love of the man for the woman—does not exist to check and warp these two."

"But kings," I murmured, faintly, "are men."

"My dear sir," he replied almost in pity, "that is just the point. King Louis is a master ruler. Has the policy of France been altered one whit by the bodily passions of King Louis the man? Look nearer home. The King of Poland," he smiled, "well, who has not heard of the galantries of the King of Poland? But the mistresses of Dresden and Warsaw will not make the King of Poland a friend or an enemy to my master and Sweden. No; statecraft is the understanding that rulers are rulers, and that subjects are men."

I stared, too astonished even to protest.

"I surprise you," he said; "but I should not, for I had

hoped you at least did not share the vulgar error that soldiers are men who should despise books. I owe much to the wisdom of the men of affairs who have instructed me, my late uncle above all,——”

“ And yet,” I cried to myself with a sharp spasm, “ that uncle had selected his other nephew for his daughter.”

“ But I confess,” my Lord added, “ I owe more to books, to two masterpieces above all.”

He handed me from the shelf two volumes which I opened in breathless eagerness. They were versions in Latin of *The Prince* of Machiavelli, and the equally famous, I dare add, infamous, *Leviathan* of my countryman, Mr. Thomas Hobbes.

“ And I,” I rejoined, dropping the volumes, “ would sacrifice all of both for ten pages of the philosophy of Mr. Locke.”

“ Locke ? ” he questioned. “ I heard that name, I think, when I was in London.”

“ I am sure you did. Mr. Locke is the greatest philosopher our country has yet produced. Herr Grefve, after reading Mr. Locke I burned my Machiavelli and I put away Mr. Hobbes. I would have burned him, too, but I had not the heart to burn two books at once.”

My Lord laughed. “ I must study this Mr. Locke,” he said. “ Pray, Monsieur Tutor, did you instruct my cousin, your pupil, in the principles of Mr. Locke ? ”

“ It was no use,” I answered, ruefully ; “ nothing could persuade the Countess, your cousin, that Mr. Locke could be right.”

“ Indeed ! And what does Mr. Locke teach ? ”

I forgot my host. “ He,” I cried, “ he has destroyed once and for all the creed that ascribes a Divine Right to kings, and he has demonstrated how sovereignty resides in, and is derived from, the people, and much else besides,” I added in shamefaced haste.

“ Ah ! ” He was regarding me with the look that the

Graf's foil had conjured up. "He must be something of a firebrand, this Mr. Locke."

I laughed outright. Mr. Locke, so calm, majestic, and ordered in his argument—a firebrand!

"And M. Martin is his disciple," he smiled. "Assuredly I must read this Mr. Locke."

He gravely picked up the two volumes from my feet, and replaced them on the shelf. "We have wandered from the point," he resumed, smiling. "You are about to visit Dresden?"

I stirred uneasily.

"You will have no better place," my Lord remarked, with calm deliberation, "for studying the politics of Sweden, nay, of Europe."

I was puzzled and he marked it. Leaning across the table, he looked me frankly in the face. "When two men," he asked, "woo the same woman what is the usual result? When one of these two men wins," he proceeded, ignoring my confusion, "what is the certain result? Sweden has wooed Schleswig successfully in the past, but supposing that the King of Poland and the Czar of Muscovy come to the aid of the distressed and beaten suitor, the King of Denmark, what then, M. Martin?"

"Herr Grefve!" I exclaimed.

"Oh! I am quite in the dark. I merely apply to the conduct of rulers the teaching of M. Machiavelli and M. Hobbes, which," he snapped his fingers playfully, "Mr. Locke, however, has demonstrated to be false."

"But do you think——"

"No, I only wonder. Nevertheless, I am quite certain that the rulers of Europe are governed by what we who read the philosophers call selfish interest,—in other words, ambition and revenge,—just as you and I are governed by these two and by love. He stood with his back to the bookshelf, eyeing me with the most delicate curl of mockery about his *controlled* lips. How cool he was, and how strong!

“ Pouf ! ” he said, lightly, “ why should we make a pother over these problems ? I wish to say something, instead, on quite a different topic, my cousin——”

“ Your cousin ? ” I repeated, dully, and my silly heart knocked at my ribs.

“ You misunderstand me,” he answered, smiling. “ I do not mean my cousin, the Fröken Countess, but my cousin Karl. You are aware he is at Dresden ? ”

I bowed in some confusion.

“ His Majesty, you will be sorry to hear, is not pleased with my cousin.”

“ His Majesty ? ” The Fru Countess’s verdict on the King rang in my ears.

He nodded coolly. “ Yes, his Majesty has heard, I regret to say, stories that my cousin is foolish and extravagant, and he hates folly and extravagance above all in a noble. He insists that my cousin should return.”

Ah !

“ I do not agree,” my Lord said, gravely. “ My cousin is young ; the stories are probably not true, or grossly unfair. Why should he return ? ”

But I had no answer to make.

“ Why, indeed ? He has no property in Sweden, and he is not of the stuff, unfortunately, to win back what has disappeared. I am therefore of opinion he had better stay where he is.”

He paused, his look inviting me to speak.

“ Do you desire, Herr Grefve, that I should carry a message to that effect ? ”

“ Oh, no ! ” The idea amused him. “ Family secrets are one thing, family messages quite another. My cousin can only return to marry the Countess Ebba, and that,” he pronounced with sublime coolness, “ I am absolutely determined to prevent. I think it right to tell you so.”

Not a trace of passion, jealousy, resentment, marred this extraordinary avowal. I stared in a bewitched fascination.

"I wish to speak plainly. You are travelling to Dresden to persuade my cousin to return. That is so?"

I rose, what prompted me I cannot say. "Herr Grefve," I said, with emphasis, "I go with the consent of the Fröken Countess Polenstjerna."

"I felt sure it must be so," was the unruffled reply.

"Then," I stammered, "why—why——"

My Lord put his hand on my shoulder in a friendly way. "M. Martin," he said, "you will, I know, do whatever you have undertaken to do. So far as I am concerned you are free to persuade, as free as when you entered this room. But on calm reflection I decided you should know what I feel."

I sank back in my chair.

"Reflect a moment," he added; "I have no power to persuade my cousin to stay or to return. He is his own master. I need not have said a word to you. It is for you to decide whether my cousin should hear what you have heard. He knows it in a fashion already, but it may be wise to remind him. Whether you can do so after what you undertook at Polenstjerna is your affair, and I have no right to dictate to you what your duty should be. But"—he paused, "it is right you should know all, not some, of the facts."

I sat crushed.

"One more point," he resumed, "and I would not be understood to utter threats. Should my cousin return, grave dangers may arise, the nature of which I cannot explain. If he does not return it is more than probable those dangers will be averted. The danger in any case will not be of my making. But I feel it right you should understand this too. And now we can dismiss the subject."

And he began to chat in his easy, polished way of kings and courts, of camps and cabinets, of books, and of what he had seen in London. One topic which played so lively and large a part in the Graf's gay confidences was wholly absent. Of women he said absolutely nothing. In these worlds where my Lord had won so notable a distinction women

doubtless had figured. But it agreed marvellously with the opinion both at Polenstjerna and at Stockholm which made my Lord so strangely averse to the society of all women, save one, that not even in his lightest moments did a woman's name ever cross his lips.

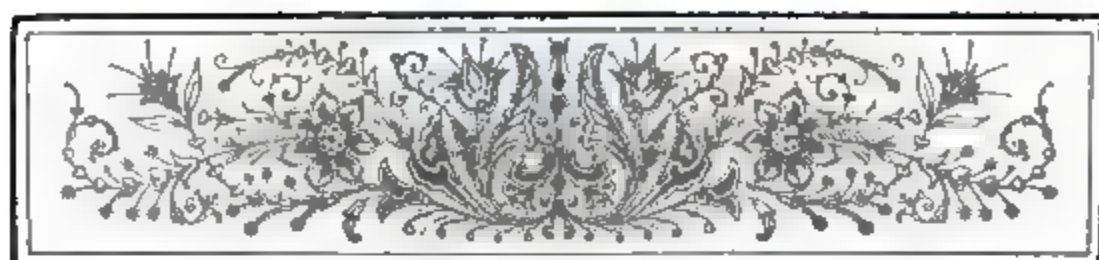
"Good-bye, M. Martin," were his last words. "You will believe me when I say I am sorry you are going. Like myself, you have your way to make in the world. I hope you will succeed. Permit me to add that you deserve to, for you are an honest man."

"Herr Grefve!" I protested, blushing with unalloyed pleasure.

"I do not use idle words of flattery. You have won the respect and admiration of the one person whose respect should make a man proud, my cousin, your pupil. And I do assure you that a man who has won her esteem is more than entitled to mine. I congratulate you with all my heart."

For the first time that day deep passion vibrated in his courteous words, and it sent me to my lodging in sore bewilderment. What was I to do at Dresden? And behind that question stalked another, more grim and merciless. The Graf had said that if my Lord Karl did not return, grave dangers would arise; my Lord Bengt said that if he did return a grave danger might be averted. They were both men to whom the secrets moving noiselessly, stealthily, behind the curtain covering the future of Europe had been opened. What did it, could it, mean? And for answer, once more in the balmy summer night on the quays at Stockholm there groped about me an evil mystery; and I was helpless, helpless!





CHAPTER VIII

THE HOSTELRY OF FRÄULEIN KÄTCHEN

THREE weeks later my horse's hoofs were slipping and clattering on the worn and stained paving of the courtyard of "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg," a courtyard as dirty and shabby as the entrance. In front of me ran a rambling house of three ill-jointed stories whose flanks straggled round the spacious and foul quadrangle. The numerous lattice windows were dirty too, and the tiles of the roof were now faded and grimy. Over all there was an atmosphere of tawdry decay and desolation. Comfort and good wine were the last things suggested by this deserted, ramshackle, slatternly hostelry. Spying disconsolately hither and thither I made out two figures, one a man in a travel-worn suit on a good horse bending down in the saddle to talk to a plump woman in high-heeled slippers, whose bare head shone red as a carrot in the afternoon sun. Their whispering voices made the deathly stillness all the more appalling, and I started when suddenly one of the lattice windows was smartly pushed open, and for a moment someone, a woman, I felt sure, moved behind it. Then it was as smartly closed.

I waited patiently, every minute striking an eery chill of mystery into my tired bones. The rider raised the woman's hand respectfully to his lips, touched his beast with his spurs, and disappeared on the right. But why did I not hear the sound of the hoofs? Horse and rider perhaps had a

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right to disappear, but that there should be no sound was positively terrifying. Dresden, the Graf had said, was a very curious city. It was.

I put my horse forward, whereupon— I drew a deep gasp. To begin with, this female was quite young, certainly not more than four-and-twenty, short, and exceedingly buxom of figure. Her plump face had the complexion of a dairy-maid in our west country; her dimpled chin suggested roguery, her mouth everything from cunning and sensuality to a smiling generosity. Down over her forehead rippled her red hair; over her ears it curled, ears only hinted at by the huge earrings, while staring at me were two of the most impudent, shameless brown eyes ever set in a damsel's head, yes, impudent and penetrating, which is the most nauseous kind of impudence. And her clothes were as remarkable as herself. Petticoat and slippers might have been worn by my Lady herself; but her low green bodice, laced with gaudy ribbons, and puffed-out silk sleeves flounced by long, flashy ruffles, would have shamed the immodesty of a juggler's or a tumbler's wench at a market fair; and on her ample bosom floated a most curious charm, a small elephant of ivory chased in gold which hung by a heavy gold chain about her neck. Elsewhere than in this amazing court I would have taken her for the brazen hussy of a wretched pothouse, yet where did a wench of that stamp get arms and neck so delicately white and fine? They were no more the arms of a servant than were the arms of the Countess Polenstjerna.

She, too, was surveying me, speechless, with the feminine insolence of a carted street-walker. But with an effort I forced myself to raise my hat, which she acknowledged with a toss of her head that set the monstrous earrings wobbling like the comb of a gobbling turkey.

"Madam," I said, bowing, "have I the honour to address Fräulein Kätchen?"

She put her hands, white, well-shaped hands, innocent of broom or scrubbing-pail, on her waistband. "Who told



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you my name?" she demanded haughtily. Another surprise for me, because her voice was not brazen, but melodious and authoritative, and her German was pure. She had been bred with women of quality.

"Will you be so good, Madam," I asked, "as to provide me with a chamber?"

Her impudent eyes continued to inspect me as if I had dropped from the moon.

"Our house is full," she said, curtly, whisking round with such an affectation of disdainful indifference that I was privileged to observe she wore brown silk stockings and owned a foot and ankle that must have ere now commanded the homage of the Graf and other connoisseurs in these things. "I am sorry to hear it," I replied to her plump shoulders and bunch of red hair, "but before I seek lodgings elsewhere I—Madam, I am desired to hand you this from the Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen."

"The Graf von Waldschlösschen?" She had whisked round again.

"You come from Sweden?" she questioned, her whole air changed. She had perused the letter twice, pursing up her lips and smiling pleasantly. What could the Graf have said?

"Yes, Madam," I answered, "direct from Polenstjerna Castle."

"You speak Swedish?" she broke in hastily, and I nodded in surprise. Could it really be that she had discovered that from the pronunciation of a single word?

"M. Martin," she began. Pah! The Graf of course had told her my name. "M. Martin, I was mistaken. We always have room for a friend of the Graf von Waldschlösschen. A girl," she added with a sly laugh, "a girl, you know, in these days must be careful." Now her laugh, impudent and coarse, was unlike her voice, but unpleasantly like her eyes.

"You shall have an attic," she proceeded, smiling. "You

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will be undisturbed then, and you will like that, *nicht wahr?*” And she laughed again.

At once she commenced to call loudly in a strange tongue. “Ah!” she observed, almost, I regret to say, with a wink, “you do not understand Polish. Polish is very useful in Dresden now that we have a Polish king, very useful.”

A woman and a man had appeared, but at my orders they simply grinned and made strange gestures.

“They do not understand German,” the mistress explained. “That is also useful in Dresden, where there are so many Germans. You and I, M. Martin, for example, can talk quite freely in their presence, and, what is better still, I know my wenches cannot dawdle over the nonsense,” she curtsied vigorously, “of gallant gentlemen from foreign parts.”

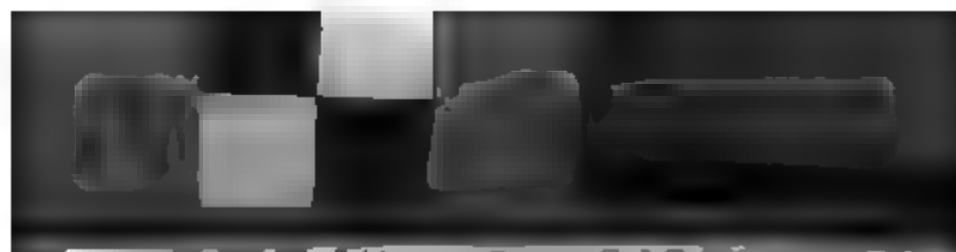
“I agree, Madam,” I said, gravely; “it is no doubt an advantage that gallant gentlemen must also give all their orders through,” I bowed low, “yourself.”

“Permit me,” she said, winking unmistakably, “to carry that valise,” and she held out a hand.

“I would rather not,” I answered timidly; “were it my own property I——”

“As you please,” she interrupted, with a haughty toss of her head, and while I bit my lip she conducted me within. Between the inside and the outside of this extraordinary inn the contrast was bewildering. I expected poverty, dirt, and disorder; I found a thick carpet, walls draped in tapestry, a broad staircase of oak polished and finely carved—in short, the wealth, comfort, and dignity of a noble’s house.

Up the stairs gaily tripped the Fräulein, leaving me to ponder at every step on the slinness of her ankle and the finery of her silken hose. At the first landing she paused. “We are empty, at present, the last guest left as you arrived,” she remarked with a giggle. And as if to heighten the falsehood a door behind me opened, a woman’s voice uttered the quiet command, “Kätchen.” The Fräulein replied rapidly in



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Polish, and the door shut with an alarmed snap. "That," she said, in a tone of defiance, "that was my mother," and when I expressed a hope to make her acquaintance later she flounced up her curls with a muttered, "*Herr Gott!* you are polite," and leaned against the balustrade to shake with merriment.

"I never reckon women as guests," she observed, inconsequently, "and you must not reckon them either."

Whereupon I assured her that at an inn I never thought of any guest but myself. For a moment she stood fingering the elephant on her bosom and her lips moved, but she thought better of it, turned sharply, and led the way upstairs. Once in the attic I noticed that my other valise was already resting on the floor.

"Ah!" said the Fräulein, coolly, "I see what is puzzling you. It is easily explained."

Leading me to the end of the little passage she kicked the door open with unnecessary vigour, why, I cannot conceive, for I had had ample opportunity already to admire her feet. A trap was now disclosed, from which my amazed eyes followed a long ladder descending straight down into a small court.

"That is your way," she said, briefly, "if you desire to ascend or descend unnoticed." She locked the door and handed me the key. "On my honour," she added simply, "it is the only one we have."

We returned to the attic and she paused to dilate on its merits. "See," she said briskly, "you can have a peep at Plauen, as well as at the spires of the Sophien Kirche. You are a Protestant, of course?"

"Yes, Madam."

"You are English?" she questioned, and her eyes danced naughtily when I bowed. "There was an English girl here," she began, and broke off with a smirk. "The English are a gallant nation."

"I hope so, but what of the English girl?"

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"That key," she whispered, without the suspicion of a blush, "could tell you more than I. Though, mind you, I never peach on my guests unless——"

"Madam!" I protested with scarlet cheeks. "I beg you to be silent. We English are proud of our women."

"Jesus!" she exclaimed, looking me up and down as if it was I who had said something discreditable. And we stared at each other in uncomfortable silence.

"So you are travelling on the King's business?" she began.

"Am I?" I inquired, which made her laugh as if she would choke.

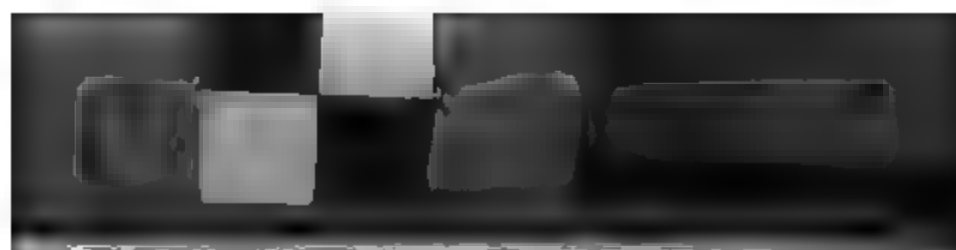
"Fritz," she said, "who is travelling on the King's business too, rode out of the courtyard as you rode in. Never mind," she remarked, cheerily, "I am better than Fritz, who is only a man. You must ask me to help you. Will you?" She put her hands behind her back and peered into my face till that horrid little elephant wagged a few inches from the lappet of my collar.

"I thank you," I said, humbly; "you will, I trust, find me easy to teach and ready to learn."

"Learn!" She threw up her nose, and I was gazing blankly at the lattice with a feeling that her skirts were whisking down the stairs.

I sat down on the bed and glared at the infernal key which lay in my hand. Round me vibrated a silence as of a house of the dead; I walked across the room and could not hear my footsteps; I peered out, it was worse still; up and down the broad staircase, and those creepy, carpeted, tenantless corridors with their rows of ghostly doors not so much as a mouse stirred to break the pall of suffocating mystery. "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg" forsooth! An inn! It was no more an inn than Polenstjerna Castle.

I was hungry and must pay my humble duties at once to my Lord Karl, so I dragged out his mother's letter, and descended. Not a soul on the stairs, not a soul in the hall.



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Hunt as I might I could see only my own lugubrious visage mocking me in the mirror. Doors, to be sure, in plenty, but I could not kick them open like Fräulein Kätchen. I waited; that was no use. I grew angry, miserable, despondent, peevish, furious in turn; still more useless. I was tired, hungry, thirsty; was I to starve in a hostelry with thalers bulging out my pockets? It was absurd, monstrous!

"Do you seek someone?" asked a soft voice in French, causing me to jump. At the foot of the stairs stood a tall, dark lady, most exquisitely dressed.

"Madam," I faltered, snatching at my hat, "to tell the truth I am looking for victuals."

She laughed gently. Standing there with her lustrous eyes,—eyes with a curious sadness, yet it was not exactly sadness, in their depths,—and her dark hair crowning a face which spoke as much of birth and breeding as of beauty, I should have called her the most beautiful woman in the world had I not seen my Lady in Sweden.

"You will find what you desire in here," she replied, with a wave of a jewelled hand, "and you must help yourself." She spoke, I noticed, with the affectation of a slight lisp, which was by no means displeasing.

"You are M. Martin," she observed, after a fleeting glance, which made me feel quite queer.

"And you, Madam," I answered delightedly, "must be Fräulein Kätchen's mother."

"Who told you that?" she asked, as if the idea pleased her, though it was as ridiculous as it was insulting.

"I—I guessed from what——"

"You have good eyes," she said, smiling; "Fräulein Kätchen's mother is your humble servant. Adieu!" She dropped me the curtsy of a duchess and vanished.

I wiped my forehead; another such meeting and I should go mad, stark mad! Ha! Hock on the table. I tossed off a glass. Well, the Graf had not exaggerated; it was superb and——

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“*Herr Gott!* but you make yourself at home in my parlour,” interrupted a mocking voice, and, mercy! here was that terrible Fräulein!

“Your mother,” I explained carefully, “brought me here and——”

“My mother! *Herr Jesus!* that is not my mother,” she broke into a naughty cackle.

“But she said she was.”

The Fräulein rapped on the table. “Never contradict a woman,” she said, “and never contradict me, or—I shall hate you.” And the flash in her glance was quite enough to make me vow hastily that I never would.

“Do you imagine, *mein lieber Herr,*” she demanded presently, “that a woman always or ever tells the truth?”

My fork dropped. “I know little of women,” I replied, cautiously, “but I hope they do.”

“You are charitable.” She was winking at her reflection in the mirror.

“I trust not, for I try to judge women as I would judge myself,” a reply which set her laughing, without any reason that I could see.

I finished in silence and after a momentary panic decided to ask her assistance in finding my Lord Karl’s lodgings. At once she was all attention.

“You know the gentleman, of course?” she asked, fingering her elephant slyly.

I was obliged to admit that I did not, whereupon she twisted up her mouth and was intensely amused. “I can direct you,” she said, and her tongue was in her cheek.

“Then you know him?” I blurted out.

“Know him? *Herr Gott!* Fine gentlemen do not know Fräulein Kätchen, nor fine ladies either. Pray, sir, do your English nobles know and make friends with those who keep inns?”

They did not, of course, but I was not compelled to say so.

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Instead, not being a fine gentleman, I filled a glass. "My countrymen," I said, "are, however, always grateful for meat and good wine. With your permission, Madam, as I am indebted to you for this excellent meal, I beg leave to drink your health."

"This is the way," she replied without so much as a word of thanks, as she unlocked a door concealed by a curtain. "Only strangers enter by the door in the court. Now, listen; go down the passage, turn to your right, and take the alley which Fritz took—you saw?—good; you will then be in the street. The lodgings you seek are not a hundred yards away, and you will know them by the lights in the windows. Remember, you can always enter by tapping on this panel, three times, so!" She struck the door sharply with a perceptible pause between each tap. "And you can be as late as you please. If you prefer it, you can mount by the ladder, but at night," she giggled, "most men find the door down-stairs the safer." And she disappeared.

I obeyed her instructions carefully. The mystery of the alley at once explained itself, for it was covered inches deep with soft earth so that a horseman could have taken his beast at a gallop through it and no one would have been the wiser. A narrow, dark, long, and vaulted lane it was, but a very proper and gruesome approach to a mysterious and gruesome house. And yonder down on the left a blaze of lights amid the darkened gables proclaimed where my Lord lay.

In five minutes I was waiting in a dimly lighted room till the master had been informed of my presence. The house was a perfect flare of candles; on the other side of the passage a Babel of excited voices, with the occasional crash of glass, told me I had plunged into one of my Lord's parties, the party of a young noble, high-spirited, and learning the lesson of life at the hands of the women of Dresden. Truly a pretty position for the tutor to the Countess Ebba! As the boisterous song which made the rafters ring drowned the crash of glass, someone stumbled against the door, kicked at it with

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a curse, and I was face to face with a young man dressed in the extremest elegance of the French mode.

“Who the devil are you?” he demanded, thickly. “If you are a money-lender you can go and be damned.”

I explained as best I could who I was and expressed my regret at having waited on him at so inconvenient an hour, to all of which he listened with some impatience. His fine blue eyes, alas! his open forehead, wonderfully delicate skin, and proudly innocent air, that consorted so ill with the disorder of his refined attire, left me in no doubt as to whom I had the honour to address. For he was as like my Lady as if he had been her twin brother, a likeness which made his crumpled wig, soiled Steinkirk, and flushed cheeks all the more painful to see.

When I began to assure him that all was well with his noble kin he cut me short by turning to the perusal of his mother's writing. It was a long letter and did not please him, for he folded it up, pushed it peevishly into his pocket, and stood absorbed in thought.

A series of wild howls without broke his reverie. “You are my cousin's tutor?” he asked abruptly, and a charming smile of penitence lit up his face. “To-morrow or any day that suits you I shall be happy to see you and hear all your news. To-night, as you see,” he laughed, “I am engaged,” and he added a most handsome apology for his rudeness in not recognising me from the first.

In a moment I was at his feet. Dissolute he might be, but he was a Polenstjerna, every inch of him, and his voice and look recalled my Lady in a way that touched my heart to tears.

With a courteous bow he had stepped forward to open the door, when it was burst open and a dozen or more of young men dressed like himself half rushed, half reeled with profane songs into the room. “Where is the money-lender?” they howled. “To the devil with the dirty Jew!”

“Gentlemen,” I said, in a great fear, “there is no money-lender here, and I will not intrude upon you further.”

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"No money-lender!" cried one. "Then why did you say you were such?"

"That won't do," cried another, "you drab of an Israelite!"

"Herr Grefve," I said, disgusted and angry, "I have the honour to be your obedient servant."

My Lord came forward. "Let the gentleman pass," he said, quietly, "he is no money-lender. Good night, M. Martin."

"But I say no," replied the other, "and—" he struggled with his sword.

"Don't be a fool," said my Lord, sharply. "Good night, M. Martin."

"Good night, M. Martin," mimicked his friend, giggling.

And now another had taken the lead. "Messieurs," he bawled, "*mes amis*, no one leaves this house without drinking a cup of wine, eh?"

They bellowed their approval.

"Enough of this foolery," my Lord broke in, wrathfully. "M. Martin will drink with you to-morrow."

"No, no, to-night!" they roared. One gripped my arm, another put his arm about my waist. "Come along," they shouted, "or be kicked down-stairs as a dirty Jew." Before I could appeal to my Lord they had dragged or carried me across the passage into a room where my appearance was greeted with salvos of rapturous applause. I thought of the Graf and laughed; I thought of my Lady and was sick for shame.

Picture to yourself a large and handsome salon, lined on one side with magnificent mirrors in which the wealth of blazing candles flared with a diabolical splendour upon a long table of finely polished mahogany running down the centre, and you have the apartment in which I found my legs again. The table was littered with glasses and wine-flacons, silver cups and bowls, all in the greatest disorder. Broken glass and pools of liquor lay on it,—broken glass

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and pools of liquor, cards, dice, empty bottles, laced hats, neckerchiefs, even coats and swords, almost hid the shining floor. In one corner my gaze fell on a pair of slippers into which certainly no man's foot could have fitted. And the company was worthy of the room. Along the table lolled elegant young men, some drinking, some shouting, some simply staring stolidly in front of them ; two were fast asleep, one with his wig soaking in a mess of claret and lemons. Dotted amongst the men—I reddened with anger—sat half a dozen buxom women, with bodices most immodestly low, their eyes sparkling, their cheeks flushed, their hair tousled as disgracefully as that of the most shameless reveller. One played with the wig of her neighbour ; another crowned her head with a garland of flowers ; a third was inviting and repelling caresses with her fan.

Near me in particular sat a superb dame, flashing with jewels, whose countenance, as of a Jezebel, made me thank God fervently that I was not a young noble in Dresden. Beside her Fräulein Kätchen had looked a modest nun. So little did the presence of the lackeys restrain these abandoned wantons that one actually threw an apple at a servant, causing him to skip nimbly amidst frantic roars of applause, and then to trip with a crash of the bottles he was carrying on his tray. Ten minutes of wild excitement passed. "A chair for M. Martin !" cried the guest at the foot of the table. "A chair for M. Martin !" they all bawled in chorus.

"He can have Marie's chair," shouted a son of Belial at my elbow, "and the baggage can sit on my knee." But Marie, I was glad to observe, rewarded the suggestion with a slap across his nose, over which they howled with merriment.

Karl had flung himself moodily into his seat at the head, had drawn his mother's letter from his pocket, and was lost in frowns. It was left to the leader at my end to seat me, to my disgust, between himself and a young woman tricked in the gaudiest finery, who promptly stopped her laughing and

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romping to transfer some of her playful attentions to her new swain, as she evidently regarded me.

"I will not eat you," she remarked, with a shrug of her bare shoulders as I shrank back. Heavens! what a child she was, and a pretty child, too, if she had only let her eyes and mouth be as God had made them.

The leader had arisen, drawn his sword, and hit three times with the hilt on the table. "M. Martin's toast!" he cried. "M. Martin will give a toast," and the cry was taken up with a horrible thumping of fists and oaths.

I sprang to my feet. "Gentlemen," I said, in a wild desire to have done with them.

" 'Ladies and gentlemen,' please," called Marie, digging me in the ribs with her fan.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began again, "I have the honour to give you a toast—[Hurrah! bravo!]
—the health of the King of Sweden."

An amazing silence fell on them. Some stared, some whispered, a few mechanically raised their glasses. "To hell with the King of Sweden!" shouted a ribald rake, but Marie clapped her hand on his mouth. Karl, too, had started to his feet; fear might be read in his eyes.

"M. Martin has given a toast," said the leader, doggedly: "the gentleman who refuses to drink it will deal with me," and as he was, next to my Lord, the soberest in the party, my poor innocent toast was drunk with sullen reluctance, even by my Lord, in whose honour I had proposed it.

"Another toast, a proper toast from M. Martin!" those terrible voices shouted. "The toast of M. Martin's mistress! the name of your mistress, sir!"

I kept my chair. Nor would I have dishonoured a trull of the streets by giving her name to these children of the Devil. "I have no mistress," I replied, but the remark only became a fresh opportunity for ribald jests. "You do not go till you give us the name of a lady," was now the remorseless cry.

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I glanced round in piteous despair, only to meet their mocking, dissolute eyes. Suddenly the girl at my elbow touched my arm. "If you want to go," she whispered, "you can toast me."

I shook my head. "Don't be a prude," she said, coaxing me to rise. "I'm as good as most."

"Ladies and gentlemen," I found myself saying, after a fresh nudge at my waistcoat, "with this lady's permission, I will give her name, which I do not know,"—[shrieks of delighted laughter],—"as my toast."

"Bravo! Bravo!" the men roared, and the women clapped their hands. Marie even tore a flower from her bodice and threw it at me, a reward, I presume, for my gallantry to the sex she degraded. "M. Martin has found a mistress. Bravo! M. Martin!" resounded from one end of the table to the other.

They drank it with three times three, joining hands and dancing round my unhappy self and that poor, painted child as if they were a rout of satyrs and mænads.

My head was aching; the fumes of the wine, the heavy scents, the dazzling lights, stupefied me, but now I could surely go.

"A forfeit, a forfeit!" screamed the shameless Jezebel in diamonds. "Who will name a forfeit for M. Martin?"

"I will," "I will," answered the eager voices. But my toast sprang up, her eyes flashing. "M. Martin belongs to me," she had the impudence to say; "I, and no one else, will name the forfeit."

She dragged her chair forward. "M. Martin," she said, saucily, as she mounted, "shall give me my shoes," and she pointed with her toe to the pair of slippers lying by the hats, the wine-soiled cards, and the dice. The suggestion made the company delirious with joy. They wagged wicked fingers at me, at the slippers, and my toast's foot, which in a dull way I noticed might have stirred envy even in Fräulein Kätchen.



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Amidst the laughter I appealed to my Lord. "Let there be an end to this tomfoolery," he said at once, in his haughtiest manner; "keep to your word, gentlemen, and let M. Martin go in peace."

"A lady has asked for her slippers," sneered the Jezebel in diamonds: "no gentleman when asked could refuse to grant so modest a request."

My Lord would have retorted angrily, but I stepped between them. "I thank you, Madam," I answered, "I shall be happy to restore the slippers."

A wild cheer rolled out. "*Herr Gott!* a sporting-cock, this!" I heard them cry approvingly, and they watched me in silence while, as delicately as my inexperience and my shame would permit, I placed the slippers one after the other on the pretty feet held out with coy effrontery for me to touch and the room to see. The slippers were on; my toast tossed her head triumphantly and jumped from the chair amidst deafening applause. "Kiss her, man," they called; "kiss her for an impudent baggage!" and the girl looked me saucily up and down as who should say, "Kiss me if you dare, but you—you—dare n't."

I returned her gaze steadily; a hush of coarse expectation caught the breath of all. The malice of wine died out of her tired young eyes; beneath her paint and powder she, poor wench, was blushing.

"Mesdames and messieurs," I said, still looking at her, "no gentleman would, I hope, refuse the petition of the humblest woman. But no gentleman may take what a lover alone has the right to ask and his mistress alone the privilege to give. Madam,"—I took her hand; I could feel the fingers tremble, and I raised it to my lips, bowing low,— "Madam, I thank you from my heart for your courtesy to a stranger, and I have the honour to wish you good night. Herr Grefve, I am your humble servant," and I marched from the room in dead silence.

"Jesus!" I heard that unhappy child exclaim with a

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choke. "Bravo!" was my Lord's cry as the door closed behind me. And I was free,—free at last, thank God! with the pure air blowing on my heated cheeks and the solemn stars shining down on the revelry of a noble learning the lesson of life.

"Were you very much shocked?" Fräulein Kätchen inquired, for it was she who, candle in hand, replied to my three mystic taps.

"No, Madam; and perhaps you will not believe me when I say I was more pained than shocked. Is it not a pity," I added, stung by her saucy disdain, "that a woman should always be what a man chooses to make her?"

She cast an involuntary glance behind her as if she expected to see someone. "*Du lieber Gott!*" she answered, slowly, "what funny things you do say!"

"Would to God, Madam," I cried, passionately, "that neither you nor anyone else thought them funny!"

She stared at me. "I wonder," she murmured, "I wonder why the Graf sent you."

"I wonder, too," I said, bitterly, "for I had guessed——"

"You are not the man for Dresden," she interrupted, with a flash of contemptuous defiance.

"And I hope I never shall be," and while she pondered in blank surprise at this rough speech I climbed to my attic, vowing that this should be the last night I would sleep with those infernal packets under my pillow.





CHAPTER IX

THE ORDER OF THE WHITE ELEPHANT

DESCENDING next morning, whom should I meet on the landing but two young women gaudily and negligently attired? They were chattering briskly, but at sight of my troubled visage on the stairs they stared, tittered, and scampered off as if it was I who was to be feared.

Once safe in Fräulein Kätchen's parlour, the swaying of the hastily drawn curtain proved that between my tap and my entrance someone had left.

"How will M. Martin amuse himself to-day?" my hostess inquired, as she offered me a chair.

"He proposes to amuse his Excellency, the Graf von Flemming, by waiting on him with a packet from Polenstjerna."

"Pouf!" she cried, casting a half-wink over her shoulder, "then you are just three minutes too late. His Excellency went out as you came in."

"What! his Excellency here?"

She put her hands on her hips and giggled. "*Ja! wohl!* 'his Excellency here!'" she mimicked. "He came to see me—me, *mein lieber Herr*, but—la! not on affairs of state, *wissen Sie*," and she stuck her tongue in her cheek.

His Excellency in this parlour! It would be his Majesty Augustus the Strong next.

"Is the packet very important?" she inquired.

"I do not know."

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“ And you expect me to believe that ? ”

“ You can please yourself, Madam ; it is the truth.”

I promptly offered her the Graf's packet for inspection, and she examined it carefully. “ I can't make you out at all,” she muttered ; “ are you a fool or a knave, that you trust me, a woman,—a woman, *Herr Gott!* whom you saw only yesterday ? ”

“ I am neither, I hope. You were kind enough to offer to help me ; and when I ask for help I trust those whom I ask.”

“ *Du lieber Gott!* ” she exclaimed ; but whether she was amused or angry I cannot say, nor did I care.

“ Well,” she answered, cheerfully, “ I will see that his Excellency gets his packet,” and she moved towards the door. In a second I had sprung after her in horrible alarm. “ I—I—I must deliver it myself!” I cried.

“ *Also,*” she said, her lip curling, “ you do not trust me ? ”

“ If I had not given my word,” I pleaded, “ you should have had it without a moment's hesitation. But you would not have me break my word of honour ? ”

“ Fine words, sir, monstrous fine words!” A nasty temper flamed in her plump cheeks. “ If you really trusted a woman you would not speak like that. You are a knave, a false knave, I fear.”

“ Yes, yes, a knave if you will, but one who keeps his word.”

Her eyes softened, and she put her hand on my sleeve. All the vulgarity in her face vanished ; her voice was the voice of reason speaking in a siren's accents. “ Listen, M. Martin,” she said. “ I am a woman ; I honour a man who trusts a woman, and you made me feel proud just now. You cannot see his Excellency before he leaves Dresden. I can, and to oblige you I will. Now, if I swear to you on my honour as a woman that I will deliver the packet with my own hands, you will trust me, will you not ? See, I will swear on my elephant, the most precious thing I have.”

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She held out the ivory charm and solemnly kissed it. "Let me swear," she whispered.

"God knows," I said in distress, "if it were my own choice I would trust you. But I have given my word and I must keep it."

"The Graf need never know," she murmured. "I will not peach on you, I swear."

"I must keep my word," I said, sadly.

She drew back her hand, tore the elephant from her neck, and dashed it in a passion on the floor.

"One more chance!" she cried, with seductive insolence, "Will you trust me?"

But my blood was up, too. "Give me my packet," I said, trying to keep cool, "and let me go."

"No," she replied, "I will not."

"Have a care, Madam!" I cried, "or you will compel——"

Whereat she thrust her hands behind her back and put her tongue out at me. "Touch me if you dare!" she mocked, "touch me if you dare! Ah! you do not dare. I thought so. There! you coward, you can take your damned packet," and she hurled it on the ground. "And now clear out! your toast of last night will no doubt find you lodging more suited to your taste than my inn." For a moment I was speechless with wrath. But I mastered myself, seized the packet, shook my fist at the insolent hussy, and strode choking to the door.

A peal of shrill laughter broke out behind me.

"M. Martin," she called, "give me back my elephant before you trample on it."

My foot was on the wretched charm, and I kicked it away in anger. Then my coat was grabbed from behind; I thrust her off, but I was swung round. Good heavens! Fräulein Kätchen was bent double with laughter.

"Bravo!" she squeezed out amidst her guffaws. "Bravo! oh! Lord! you will kill me. For God's sake don't look like

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that." She was holding out a hand. "You will do," she cried, weeping with laughter. "You will do. *Herr Gott im Himmel!* The Graf was right after all. If Dresden is not the city for you, M. Martin, you are the man for Dresden. Come, don't be a ninny; forgive me; you shall, you must!"

Slowly it dawned on my shattered senses that I had been made a bubble of by the Graf and this red-haired wench.

"Oh!" I said, shaking my clenched fists, "oh, it was—it was—you are—you are a wicked woman. How dare you?"

"Women in Dresden are wicked," she answered, cocking her head at me. "But there! forget all my nasty words. I did not mean them. Lord! how solemn you were! I really thought you were going to strike me, and if you had I think I should have given you a k—" and she fell to laughing again.

"I could beat you," I cried, for my fury was still hot.

"Sh! sh!" she wagged a mocking finger; "no liberties, remember, no liberties, *mein lieber*, if you please. *Also!* we are going to be friends, now. Listen. You shall see his Excellency to-night at eight o'clock. On my honour as a woman you shall."

"Then he is not going away?"

"Certainly not. O! M. Martin! if you believe everything a woman in Dresden tells you, you will soon be in a sad mess. So present yourself as I tell you at eight o'clock and you shall keep your precious promise that you made such a silly pother about. Do you keep your promises to women as you keep them to men, M. Martin?" and that wretched Fräulein Kätchen was poking a naughty finger at my hot cheeks. "Ah! women in Sweden," she whispered, "perhaps are not wicked. Oh! don't ask me to believe you are such a saint as you pretend to be. Who put on a girl's shoe last night, eh?"

But I was not in the humour to be taunted and she had the sense to perceive it,

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"Keep this," she said, quietly, offering me the tiny elephant, "to remind you when a woman tempts you to do something, that you had better not."

"What does the elephant signify?" I asked, somewhat mollified.

"It is his Majesty's favourite Order. That one was given me by—well, never mind, I won't make you angry again by telling you who it was—remember, eight o'clock to-night. Adieu!" My Lady could not have retired more modestly.

As I returned to my attic the two young women who had fled as I descended were leaning over the balustrade, and they had been joined by a third. This time they did not scamper away, but stared with shy insolence, jauntily drawing back their skirts to let me pass. The newcomer I could have sworn was familiar to me; I studied her face; yes, of course, she was one of those who had been the noisiest at my Lord's party. What in heaven's name was she doing here? What, for that matter, was I? Poor things! they had once been innocent, but like myself they had come to Dresden. The raw bumpkin of the study was learning so fast that in a few more lessons he would not be able to look in the pure, proud eyes of his Lady without shame.

I shut myself up. Out there beyond the red roofs at my feet was a brilliant city, a city of love and wine and laughter. I had only to ask and its love and laughter could be mine; the keys to its unhallowed portals, its joys, and pleasures were in the hands of Fräulein Kätchen. Love and laughter! it was a city of sorrow and tears. Better far the pagan Plato and the brooding stillness under the eaves than all that Dresden could give! And so I remained happy with my two or three books until it was time to seize my packets and present myself to the man whom the Fru Countess had called the Master of Dresden.

Fräulein Kätchen had kept her word. A lackey swiftly escorted me through rooms filled with a gay crowd: soldiers, courtiers, nobles, loungers,—the crowd which haunts the

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antechambers of the great ones of the earth. Surprise, whispered asides, shakings of snuff-boxes, raised eyebrows, flattery, envy, malice, were on every side. M. Martin, in a brown stuff suit, was about to have an audience, while they, in their silks and laces, must wait. One splendid young gentleman in particular greeted me with a superb sweep of his hat ; it was the son of Belial who had threatened to kick me down-stairs for a drab of a Jew. But where would his hat and his head have been had his coat been polluted by M. Martin's elbow—M. Martin, cooling his heels in his Excellency's outer salon ?

A church clock boomed out eight as the closet door was opened by a gentleman usher. " You are punctual," said a harsh voice ; " be good enough, M. Martin, to take a seat. My business will be finished in four minutes."

His Excellency was standing by a large table covered with papers, conversing with a gentleman, booted and cloaked, whose face I could not see, but whose stature was that of a giant. In the great man himself I was profoundly disappointed. Short and squarely built, with a fleshy face and figure, he suggested nothing of the mighty minister, the master of affairs, whose toiling brain carried the burden of a state and the destinies of a kingdom. His air was that of a captain of dragoons, curiously blended with the foppery of a gay man of the world. He had fought and commanded, perhaps, but the deep furrows in his countenance spoke more of hours spent at parties like those of my Lord Karl than of night watches over the secret despatches of the cabinets of Europe. Domineering, cunning, and cruel I pronounced him—a rake, an intriguer, and an implacable enemy. Of greatness even in vice I could find no trace.

" Good night, Excellenz," said the cloaked figure with a low obeisance, and suddenly one of the papers he was gathering up fluttered to the floor. When I restored it to him he acknowledged my politeness with a charming bow. Our eyes met ; a thrill stabbed me through ; such deep, dark



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eyes in his sallow face, eyes shifty, penetrating, and burning with the dull glow of damp coals. Surely never slumbered in mortal eyes such pride, ambition, revenge, immortal hate. Yet his manner was pleasantness and peace.

"Did you ever hear of Herr Patkul?" his Excellency began, abruptly, when we were alone.

I started. Who in Sweden had not heard the story of the Livonian noble, condemned under Charles XI. to death for treason, the rebel who had fled from his sentence, had been declared a traitor and an exile, and was now thought by most to be dead? His, indeed, was a name only to be whispered by Swedish tongues.

"Ah!" chuckled his Excellency, "I see he is not forgotten. He never will be, eh?" he chuckled hoarsely again. "That was he," he added, carelessly.

"Does your Excellency really mean——"

"That was Herr Patkul," he repeated to my astounded ears. "But," he held up a snuffy forefinger, "not a syllable that you saw him in my closet, or," he laughed, "he will vow to have your blood, and he is a man of his word."

The room swam round me; I was obliged to sit down.

"I trust," his Excellency began, "that you have found Dresden to your taste. It is a charming city, is it not? The air salubrious, the river noble, the mountains pleasing to the eye. For the traveller," he continued, easily, but scanning me narrowly all the time, "it is, I venture to pronounce, a paradise. And if his Majesty lives to carry out his schemes, it will be still more worthy of our gracious King and Elector, whom God preserve!"

"The Graf von Waldschlösschen," I stammered, trembling under his scrutinising eye.

"Ah! yes, the Graf! A man in a thousand, M. Martin, and a most faithful servant of his master and mine. And the Countess Polenstjerna,—well, too, I hope?"

"She desired me to present her humble duties to your Excellency."

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“Charming of her, quite charming,” he murmured; “but I hardly deserve such courtesy, since I have not the honour of her acquaintance.”

He laughed maliciously at my confusion. “Is she grown up?” he inquired. I saw my mistake and hastened to explain it.

The great man smiled indulgently. “For shame! my dear sir,” he said, “you think of the elder lady and I of the younger, while you are young and I—” he patted his waistcoat regretfully. “Perhaps the young Countess is not grown up?”

I assured him she was. The crafty fox, as if he did not know!

“Then she will be married soon, I presume?” he turned to snuff one of the candles.

“Excellenz, I do not know.”

He permitted himself a low laugh. “Come now,” he expostulated, “you have ears, M. Martin. By the way, not so long ago I met here a young noble, Count Bengt Polenstjerna.”—(My Lord Bengt had been in Dresden!)—“Gossip—we are all, I fear, sad gossips in Dresden—pointed to him as the happy man. Is gossip right?”

He looked at me closely.

“I cannot say,” I answered, determined to speak the truth. “A tutor is not permitted to share in the gossip of his employers.”

“What discretion!” he murmured, with a purr of approval. “I dislike gossip as much as yourself. Count Bengt interested me; he is a soldier, and poor, as I am. Ah! it is cruel to be noble and poor in Sweden, where they have not so generous a sovereign as ours, eh, M. Martin?”

I had no answer to make.

“Curious stories,” he continued, in a confidential tone, “very curious stories of the discontent of the Swedish nobles have reached me. There are wild spirits in that great country, I fear. I hope Count Bengt is not amongst them.”

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His glance invited, nay, commanded, a reply.

"Count Bengt does not discuss these matters with me," I said, truly enough.

"He is not so wise, then, as I thought," and he chuckled. "But I am glad it is no business of mine to." His manner suddenly changed ; he had become the imperious soldier.

"You are aware, of course, what this packet contains?" he questioned, with harsh brevity, as he took it from me.

"No, your Excellency."

His eyebrows went up and his snuffy fingers beat with emphatic incredulity on his temple. Ripping off the cover he pored over the contents, written, I could see, in cipher, the key of which he sought in a locked drawer. As he read he frowned, and when he looked at me presently a storm was gathering in his bloodshot eyes. "You have guessed," he asked, almost with a snarl, "at the nature of the Graf's despatch?"

"Yes," I replied at once ; "I guessed it referred to the private affairs of Count Karl Polenstjerna."

A playful smile convinced me that my guess was correct. "Why?" he demanded.

"From a conversation with the Frau Gräfin von Polenstjerna, when she desired me to deliver this also," and I promptly handed him packet number two.

Conceal it as he might, he was supremely astonished, and he stared at the packet and myself as if we were in league to dupe him with very clumsy lies.

When the Countess's papers were before him I was much puzzled to observe that they were written in the same cipher as the Graf's ; and their contents pleased him even less.

"Are you quite sure," he questioned, harshly, "that neither the Graf nor the Countess knew of each other's writings?"

"I am positive," and I thought it prudent to give my reasons at length, not even hiding that unhappy accident with the letter to my Lord Karl. He listened with the

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closest attention, burrowing into my face with his foxy eyes.

"H'm!" was the caustic comment. "You are a very—frank young gentleman."

"I was trained to tell the truth, Excellenz," I said, stiffly, "and I have never regretted my training."

He suppressed his nasty chuckle with a pinch of snuff, and promptly turned to the papers, comparing them line by line, and growling like a disappointed dog over a tough bone.

"Did Count Bengt," he inquired, imperiously, "know of your mission?"

"I think not."

"Think!" he took me up sharply,—“you are not sure?” His eyes grew bright as a hawk's which sees its prey.

Whereupon I thought fit to give my reasons a second time at length.

"But the young Countess," he said, impatiently,—“what of the young Countess?”

"Oh!" I said, smiling, "I can swear she knew nothing of either packet."

Somewhat relieved he rolled the papers up and locked them away. "You delivered the letter of the elder Countess to her son last night, I think?" he asked, with a wicked grunt at my start. "Is that the letter, M. Martin?"

My hand was shaking with excitement as I examined the cover carefully. "Yes, Excellenz," I said, with deep emotion, "it is."

"You see," he remarked with a bloodthirsty purr, "other persons, my dear sir, besides yourself can be careless. But do you not want to read it?"

"No," I answered promptly.

"*Du lieber Gott!*" he exclaimed. For the second time I had given him a shock.

"You infer," he said, frowning, "that it is no business of mine?"

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"Pardon me," I replied, "your Excellency is his Majesty's servant, and, I presume, has the right to judge what is your business, as I, with all deference, have the right to judge what is mine."

"To be sure, to be sure," he murmured. Then he rose, smiling. "You have done the King a great service," he said, warmly, "but there still remains to persuade my—our charming friend, Count Karl, to leave Dresden at once."

"Your Excellency," I stammered, "will pardon me, but I do not understand why Count Karl should return, when by remaining here he can inherit——"

"Could have inherited," he interrupted, dryly. "My young friend, the Polish estate is not worth that—" he snapped his fingers. "The Jews they mistook you for,"—he paused to grin,—"and the adorable chivalry of Count Karl towards—" an unclean laugh completed the sentence. "That being so, his friends desire him to return home where he can cure and be cured of his—Dresden tastes."

I sat twisting my hands. "Your Excellency," I said, boldly, "proposes that he should marry the Countess Ebba."

"Oh! pardon me, not I, but his late uncle and his admirable mother. Does—ahem!—M. Martin object?"

"There is the King," I protested, wincing.

"H'm! For a tutor you have learned a good deal," he replied, "but do not let the King trouble you. We—rather, I should say, the Frau Gräfin—has taken steps that will ensure the King's consent."

"What!" I cried, forgetting in whose presence I was.

The guile in his eyes became indescribable. "I cannot explain," he answered, with emphasis, "but later on I assure you there will be no difficulty."

The light streamed in upon me. The evil mystery had taken flesh. I was in the toils of the would-be master of Dresden. He—he—was the evil.

"You are of course aware," he proceeded, rubbing his hands and peering into my face, "of the—ahem!—obstacle to

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Count Karl's departure?" A detestable finger was wagged at my blushes. "Yes, it is a lady; with a young man it is always a lady. A woman," he sighed with the most abominable resignation, "is the cause of most men's misfortunes. A woman is responsible for the first misfortune of all,—that we are here in the world at all, and a woman lays us out when we are dead. A woman causes all the mischief between those two deplorable events. Count Karl," his voice was cruelly harsh, "must go—must," he repeated.

"And if he refuses?"

"We will not consider that," he said, shortly, and with a most disagreeable frown. "But if you have the interests of the family of the Countess Ebba at heart you will do your best to do what you promised, and also hold your tongue." For five minutes silence drove the remark home.

"To-morrow," he said, in his pleasantest manner, "the Princess Lubomirska will receive her friends. His Majesty will be there; the obstacle, Count Karl's charming obstacle, will be there, too, and they must all meet M. Martin."

I stammered out my thanks, very insincere thanks.

"Meanwhile," he said, briskly, "enjoy our city as best you can." Again that unclean laugh. "If women, my dear sir, are what I said, they are also responsible for most of our fleeting pleasures. You are in excellent hands with Fräulein Kätchen, as doubtless you have discovered." A leer as of a satyr stole into his bloodshot eyes. He had opened the closet door, and I could hear the stir of expectancy in the antechamber. Out there hungry eyes could see him put his hand on my shoulder. "*Au revoir!*" the great man said, in clear tones; "be here to-morrow at five o'clock, and do not let the ladies make you late. Good night, M. Martin."

The church clock boomed out ten, proclaiming to the envious crowd that M. Hugh Martin, late tutor to the Countess Polenstjerna, had been closeted for two hours with the would-be master of Dresden, and had left him with his



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gouty fingers on his shoulder and a naughty jest on his lips. Truly, in the King's business lay a potent magic.

And now my one desire was to get into the night air, and wash away the feel of that polluting clutch of an evil mystery which would make me an instrument, unclean as itself was unclean, of its vile power.

My God! what was that? I had walked swiftly and reached the end of "Fritz's Alley"; before me lay the front of "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg," looking almost like the inn of a fairy's dream in the September moonlight; chill silence lay on gable, lattice, and courtyard; and yonder through the silence three men, cloaked and masked, were stealing in file up to the door at which in a minute I should be tapping. I sprang back into the shadows, not a second too soon, for one of the three threw a searching glance round the deserted court. Heavens! their three swords flashed naked from the scabbards, setting my heart pounding as if it would burst. A sudden, stifled cry, a woman's voice, then the clash of steel striking steel. *It was in Fräulein Kätchen's parlour!* In a mad resolution I whipped out my sword and bounded forward. Down the passage I rushed and sprang into the room.

Struggling with the latch of the locked door opposite was a woman in a loose white robe, crying out in agonised Polish. In front of her was a burly figure, his hat jammed down on his brow, his cloak shrouding face and form, and he was crossing swords with two men at once, who were pressing him hard. A third lay moaning and writhing on the carpet. With a howl that surprised myself I rushed at the nearest of the ruffians.

Luckily my poor skill was not seriously tried. Half a dozen passes, and the burly man disarmed his antagonist, seized him, and hurled him, as one might hurl a plate, through the window. The horrible crash was too much for my opponent; he made a bolt for the door, but not before the burly man had gripped him by the neck and tossed

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him after his fellow. Another crash, and all was still again.

The woman, with a sobbing cry, dropped on her knees in prayer, covered her face hastily, as she knelt, with a light mantilla. The burly man and I glared at each other panting. The figure on the carpet, which had been writhing and moaning, lay perfectly quiet.

A strange impulse made me stoop and thrust my hand inside his shirt. "He is dead, sir," I said, and then I looked at my hand. It was dripping with blood. A sword-thrust had gone clean through his body.

"Take off his mask," said the man in the cloak. His voice was extraordinarily imperious, the voice of one accustomed to be obeyed.

I removed the mask. The man in the cloak lifted a candle, stooped, and stared with rapt interest.

"Ha ! I thought so," he muttered with a grim grunt, when the light revealed the face of a hireling desperado. "Let the carrion rest outside," and in a trice he had sent him hurtling the way of his companions.

I shuddered. The woman, too, thrust out her arm, bare to the shoulder, as if to plead for mercy. Her mantilla swayed, and fell off. Merciful heavens ! It was Fräulein Kätchen's mother !

"Why, it is M. Martin," she exclaimed, flushing over neck and breast.

I wrenched off my hat ; I, too, was hot with shame and confusion. How beautiful she looked, with her dark hair and lustrous, sad eyes, her scanty white drapery falling about the exquisite curves of her slender, voluptuous figure !

"M. Martin, or whoever it is," said her companion, coolly, "you arrived in the very nick of time. *Mon Dieu !* another three minutes and I had not been here to thank you. Why did I not lock that door ? Shut it now," he commanded, brusquely ; "there may be more of those gentry lurking in the passage." He threw his bloody sword with a clatter on

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the table, tossed off his hat, and filled two glasses of Burgundy. "Here is your health, sir," he said, as he gulped the wine down. "I shall not forget your services, and to the end of my life,"—the lady put out a timid, restraining hand, which he impatiently pushed away,— "you will have the thanks of Friedrich August of Saxony."

I looked at his dark brows and laughed. Friedrich August of Saxony ! It was a good joke.

He smiled, too, and, as if he understood, flung his cloak open. An amazing glitter leaped across the candles. On the left breast of his superb coat gleamed a star ; suspended round his neck by a blue silken ribbon with a jewelled clasp hung an ivory elephant chased in gold. The blood buzzed in my ears. The Order of the White Elephant ! It was, it really was his Majesty !

Dropping on my knee I kissed penitently the hand graciously held out. Then he raised me with the grip of a bear. "You have my thanks," he repeated, smiling. "I shall not forget you, M. Martin."

Nor I him, for my poor fingers were crushed. No wonder the men had gone through the windows like plates ! It was no less than his Majesty Augustus the Strong, who could crumple a horse-shoe in one fist,—the King of whose Titan strength all Europe talked.

His Majesty had drawn an emerald ring from his finger. "Do me the honour," he said genially, "to accept this trifling token of my gratitude. When you want help, it may remind you that you have a friend at court."

How irresistible was his smile ! The Graf was right : his master was charming, quite charming.

"And what is M. Martin doing in my delightful city of Dresden ?" he inquired.

The lady said something rapidly in Polish. The King gazed at me with deep interest, asked a question or two in the same tongue, nodding brightly at her answers.

"So you are in my service, though I did not know it," he

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said. "If all my servants were as useful as you, M. Martin, Dresden would, indeed, be a pleasant town. But, *mon cœur*,"—he pinched the lady's cheek playfully,—“you, too, must thank our friend here.”

The lady offered her hand with the air of a queen. “M. Martin,” she whispered, “knows, I am sure, that I am doubly grateful for myself and my king.” He turned at her words and caressingly threw the mantilla round her shoulders, whispering tenderly till her eyes gleamed and her bosom heaved.

I acknowledged her sweet courtesy as best I could and begged leave to retire.

“As you please,” the King answered, “but we shall meet again under more pleasant circumstances, I hope.” He took a step forward and bent his swarthy brows on me. “M. Martin,” he said in a deep voice, “no doubt understands that he must keep strict silence——”

“You can trust him, sire,” the lady interrupted, quietly, with an entrancing smile at me. “I can promise your Majesty that when the gentleman has given his word he never breaks it.”

Fräulein Kätchen again! Fräulein Kätchen everywhere! I had good right to bless my obstinacy of the morning.

“I am sure of it,” said his Majesty, affably. “We do not require your word, sir. Good night.”

And that was how I clambered up the secret ladder to my attic for the first time, climbing it in the service of Augustus the Strong, and with one hand red in the blood of his enemies.

But where was Fräulein Kätchen? where were the painted girls who had chattered on the landing? where were the servants? Over the attic as over the stairs lay a stifling pall of murky silence, stark, unholy silence, and down there in the moonlit courtyard was stretched a dead man, face upwards, with a sword-thrust through his lungs.



CHAPTER X

M. MARTIN CONTINUES HIS EDUCATION

ALAS! for my sturdy resolutions! they melted like snow in the sun next morning when I was received by Fräulein Kätchen with a taunting laugh and a comically contemptuous shrug of naughty shoulders at the window of her parlour. Through the broken woodwork the eye now looked straight across the dirty, deserted court, dirty but for one great white patch in the green flags. That was where the dead man had lain, and it had been washed.

"You," she had the audacity to say, "you have prevented us from talking here, so you will come up-stairs, if you please, where it is not so cold and open."

She took me to that room on the first landing where I had first seen her "mother," a most wonderful and spacious apartment, furnished, the Graf would have said, in a style worthy of the mistress of a king. The tapestries alone were not to my taste. The artist had permitted himself to display the *amours* of heathen gods and goddesses with a most indecorous freedom, and in the centre of the clothesless medley had actually been so bold as to place a portrait of his Majesty, figuring as Apollo, an Apollo to the ribbon of whose lyre, in the most ludicrous manner, was attached the Order of the White Elephant.

"Sit down, sir," said the cheerful Fräulein. "We shall not be disturbed here at this hour even by his Majesty."

But I would not sit down. "For God's sake!" I implored,

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“tell me what it all means. You shall tell me, you shall!”

But she only rubbed her nose and winked.

“And you—you allow these things to go on in your inn?” I spluttered incoherently.

“Allow!” she choked. “Lord! Allow! My inn! *Herr Gott im Himmel!* you do say funny things.”

“But the King—his Majesty——”

“Well, I suppose the King must do as he chooses, as most kings do. When he is pleased to visit us, we take good care to be out of his way; remember that, M. Martin.”

“But your mother?” I stammered.

She burst into loud laughter. “Oh! you’ll be the death of me. My mother!” She flung herself back in her chair and wiped her eyes with her apron.

“What,” I demanded sternly, “were those scoundrels doing in your parlour last night?”

She stole up to me. “Where are your eyes, M. Martin?” she whispered. “Pfui! The next time you see my mother, look at her pretty hand for a marriage ring. Supposing,” her voice dropped, “you are a husband and get an idea into your silly head; you do not know it is——” she jerked her thumb at Apollo, “and supposing you are too great a coward to take your sword, well, you will hire men who are poor to take theirs—eh?”

I clenched my fists. The serious impudence of her eyes was indescribable.

“And supposing,” she continued, with a fine gesture, “his Majesty will give you power and wealth and influence,—Jesus! there is n’t a woman in Dresden who would not——”

“Fräulein Kätchen,” I interrupted, passionately, “you would not do it, you know you would not.”

She was staring at Monsieur Apollo, but at this she whisked round. “And, pray,” she demanded defiantly, “how do *you* know that I have not done it already?”

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"I won't believe it," I said, doggedly, and I meant it.

"We won't fret about that," she replied, coolly; "men are men and women are women and kings are kings. I cannot alter them, nor can you, M. Martin. Women!" she snorted, "we are not in this room to talk about them. No, indeed. We are all grateful for your help last night, the King and the lady, and I, yes, I, too. Some day you may find out why. But take my advice. If you want to finish your business in Dresden do what you are told. *Verstehen?* And shut your mouth tight and keep it shut." She stretched out a daring finger, touching me gently on the breast. "Yours is not the only sore heart in this city. Some of those women whom you think so vile, whom you scorn,—oh! yes, you do, some—M. Martin, I am your humble servant."

In her maddening way she had smiled and vanished.

I shook my fist at the crowned and laurelled Apollo and his clothesless rout of beauties. But the Fräulein's advice was good. The time had come for me to finish my business in Dresden. I must hence and see my Lord Karl. And, tutor though I was, I must talk to him with a freedom the mere thought of which lay heavy on my spirit, because on his answers hung momentous issues. Not for all the kingdoms and principalities, not for all the veiled threats of ministers, profligates, or masked hirelings would I lift so much as my little finger to send back to Polenstjerna, to the woman whom I loved, a cousin and a husband who would ruin her life. And it was my Lord and none other who must decide for me.

He received my apologies with the most gracious words, looking, as he smiled, more like my Lady than ever. We were in the very salon which had rung with the orgies of that licentious rabble. To-day it was swept and garnished, and save for a litter of papers on one of the card-tables and in a corner on the floor it might have been the study of my Lord Bengt. But for all his courtly speech my Lord

was as ill at ease as when he had sat moody and flushed at the head of his revellers. His handsome boyish face, designed to be as frank, wholesome, and serenely gay as that of his cousin, the Fröken Countess, was lined with care. And behind the merry, proud eyes peeped out deep strivings and fierce struggles of soul. I studied him carefully. Alas! I learned only that he bitterly regretted I had seen what I had seen.

“Sit down,” he said, gently, “and tell me of Polenstjerna.”

He insisted on my speaking Swedish, and we talked a good half-hour of Sweden. He had so many questions to ask of his mother, of my Lord Bengt, of all the things dear to the exile in a foreign land. It was good indeed to see his eye grow bright, to hear his child's laugh as we darted from one topic to another. Of my Lady alone he did not so much as inquire whether she were alive. Yet even so, I confess my hard thoughts crumbled to pieces bit by bit, as I perceived that not all the cities he had seen, not Paris and Dresden, not Vienna and the sunny towns of the South of which the Graf had chattered with such rapture and abandon, had quenched in him that love for the cold North which God has planted alike in the Swede's and the Englishman's heart.

“Why,” he cried, a carol in his voice, “I believe you long for Polenstjerna as passionately as I do. Ah! Monsieur Tutor, I would give the whole of Versailles and two Dresdens for one quarter of an hour on the Terrace where I could see and smell the Baltic; for one ten-minutes after the bears in the woods when King Eric's Tower is blocked with snow.”

“Yes, Herr Grefve,” I answered, “I think I should be happy, too, if I thought I could see the fountains and the pleasaunces of your home again.”

“You shall,” he muttered eagerly, and then he let his hand drop. A stony despair took possession of his face. “No,” he said, wearily, “it is impossible.”

I plucked up courage and, speaking with such earnestness

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as I could command, delivered both my messages, that from his mother and that from the Graf.

He listened, his head resting on his hand, while I waited for his reply in feverish excitement.

"You may spare your words," he answered, slowly. "I am obliged to you for the trouble you have taken; but I cannot leave Dresden. It is impossible." I waited two minutes and then, faltering, I added what the Countess Ebba had bid me say. A flush sprang into his cheeks. His fingers twisted together. The crisis had arrived.

"Thank you," he said, with an impatient gesture. "I thank you, but it is impossible."

"You will pardon my presumption, Herr Grefve," I answered, calmly, "but I should fail in my duty if——"

"Duty!" he repeated, peevishly; "M. Martin, you have done your duty by speaking and I mine by listening. I cannot leave Dresden. That is my answer."

His obstinacy was so marvellously like that of my Lady that I was not beaten yet. "Herr Grefve," I urged, "I have been informed on the best authority that you are perilling your interests."

The high spirit in him flared out. "Excuse me," he interrupted, "I am better acquainted with my interests than you or anyone else can be. And I stay here." He rose. "That," he added, proudly, "that is enough."

"Very good, my Lord, then I stay too."

For the moment he was in doubt whether to laugh or to be indignant at my impertinence.

For a minute he paced up and down, and then, to my utter astonishment, marched up to me and put both hands on my shoulders. "You taught her daily for two years," he said, gently; "now, if the Countess Ebba were your sister, yes, your sister, would you, speaking as one gentleman to another, still repeat the advice to return?" I quailed, and indeed would have given all I possessed to escape from his steady eyes. "No," he said, slowly; "your face says no;

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for you have not yet learned to conceal what you think. Let me tell you, then, that two nights ago you helped to drink my last groschen. At this moment I am ruined. Damn it! sir," he pushed me away, but not angrily, "do you know what it is to be ruined, sucked dry by those cursed Jews, and those women, poor wantons? Why, the very coat I wear is not my own. Look at them,"—he kicked at the litter of papers,—“debts, debts, debts; I am ruined and up to my ears in debt. Pah! I have had two rollicking years, and this,”—he kicked again at the papers,—“this is the result. And now, M. Martin, do you still tell me to go home—home?” he laughed bitterly.

What, in Heaven's name, was I to say?

“I have not finished by any means,” he pursued, grimly. “When I left Polenstjerna two years and more ago, my cousin was a mere child. If I go back I go back to marry her. My uncle wished it, my mother commands it, but,” he paused, “does my cousin love me?”

I blenched again. “Herr Grefve,” I replied, feebly, “when you ask that question, you forget who I am and what I was at Polenstjerna Castle.”

“No, I do not. A tutor, you say; but, unless you were much more, my mother, my friend, the Graf von Waldschlösschen, would not have sent you on this mission. A tutor, *mon Dieu!* you have not talked to me to-day like a tutor. Answer my question. Does my cousin love me?”

I was obstinately silent.

He laughed. “Well, well! let that pass,” he muttered. “But answer this you shall. What, exactly, did the Countess Ebba say? I wish to have the truth, M. Martin!”

“The Fröken Grefvinna,” I replied, feeling for the words, “said—that she was ready to obey.”

“Exactly,” he said, dryly. “My cousin is a woman and a Polenstjerna. God! she would have died rather than have sent that message had it not been what I say. She does not love me—and you know it.”

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I bowed my head. I could not deny it. But I could have kissed his hand for the chivalry of that last speech. He, too, was a Polenstjerna, and that was how he knew.

"Good heavens! M. Martin," he cried, "stay here a few weeks and you will learn what happens when a man marries a woman and there is no love between them. Is the truth"—he laughed savagely and kicked at the papers—"likely to make my cousin begin to love me—me, the broken rake? I will not dishonour her, I will not dishonour myself, by going back. And I will tell you why. I love another woman. You thought me a despicable libertine. I read it in your face; do you think so now?"

I was shamed into silence. A cry rose up in my heart. The Graf was right. He must be "saved"; ah! yes, but how?

My Lord was pacing to and fro. "You forget," he said, with a strange coolness, "you forget that by staying in Dresden I can keep my name of which I am proud from dishonour."

"The estates, then, are real?" I stammered.

"Real! of course they are real. Who put the idea into your head that they are not? They are real enough to pay my debts, and leave me richer than I have ever been. And, M. Martin," he added, slowly, almost with a tortured cry, "you cannot understand that for me to return to Sweden is such dishonour as you do not dream of." He flung himself into a chair and covered his face.

Then in sheer light-headedness I took a very daring step. "Herr Grefve," I began, "are you quite sure you will be able to marry——"

He was facing me, his eyes blazing with anger, and I trembled. "By God! sir," he cried, "this is insufferable! I have given you my confidence: I have not given you permission to insult me."

"The Graf—" I faltered.

"Damn the Graf!" he exclaimed. "Not another word, or——"

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I can only suppose my terror-stricken face moved his better feelings, for he stopped short and stared at me in a way that filled me with pity. For I read in one of those awful flashes that reveal a man's soul that the Princess whom he loved did not love him.

"My promise, Herr Grefve," I murmured, helplessly, "my promise to the Countess Ebba."

"You must settle that with your conscience," he answered, fretfully, "as I have settled it with mine."

"And the Countess, your mother—," I urged, hopelessly, for I was beaten now.

"Proposes to drag me from perdition by marrying me to a woman whom I do not love and who does not love me. It will not do, M. Martin, it will not do."

"But you would love her. Before God, my Lord, you would."

"No, no," he muttered, after a pause, "it is too late. Go back to Polenstjerna, Monsieur Tutor, and tell them so. Tell them,"—he rose, tears in his eyes,—"that they need not be afraid. If I can marry the woman whom I love there will never be more than one woman in the world for me. I will never, I swear it to you, never touch a dice-box again. If I cannot marry her, I will go to the devil, and there's an end of it."

He sat down and his feet dabbled recklessly in the wreckage of two rollicking years. "Were you ever in love?" he asked, earnestly. "Ah! you too, then, have suffered the tortures of the damned. Dishonour! what is dishonour to a man in love? And I dreamed of drowning my agony in wine and the caresses of those girls, caresses to be bought for money, caresses that vanish when the money vanishes. Leave me, M. Martin, leave me, I beg."

And there I left him to his debts, his remorse, and the tortures of the damned—assuredly not the lesson which the Fru Countess had sent him into the great and real world to learn—the lesson that love is not a thing to be bought, nor

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yet something which the nobly born can claim in virtue of his quality. And I, poor, ignorant bookworm of yeoman blood, who knew nothing of real men and women, I knew that whatever else Count Karl had learned in his two mad years, he had been taught the one supreme and priceless lesson of life.

I had gone to him to acquit myself of a disagreeable duty; I came away with a duty still to perform. My Lord had decided my course for me. He must be "saved," and there was no one to save him but myself. He did not love my Lady; she did not love him. No matter. Let him return, aye, let him fight it out in honest rivalry with my Lord Bengt, and the rest must be in God's hands. Even if he failed it would be better that he should belong to Sweden than to Dresden and its Apollo King. I had peered now into the souls of both cousins, and my Lady's father had judged aright. My heart told me that my Lord Karl would make a better husband for her whom I loved than the passionless captain of Trabants, for all his matchless powers of mind and body, for all his superb will. What were kingdoms and principalities as compared with her happiness?

In the streets of Dresden I thanked God that to me, the tutor, it was revealed that nought else was of value so I could help to keep free from stain the soul of the woman whom I loved. But how—how was it to be done? Karl was in the toils; but leave Dresden he must, and if I had to go down on my knees for it Fräulein Kätchen should help me.

I hurried back to "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg," my brain already feverishly bubbling with plans and goodness knows what foolishness.

The lynx-eyed Fräulein spied me in the very act of clambering secretly by the ladder to my attic.

"Oh! ho!" she cried; "that's the way, is it? whither away so fast, my good sir?" and she playfully seized my

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coat tails. "So you think I do not know you wait on his Excellency at five o'clock. Come down, M. Martin, and let me see that you are fit to present yourself."

And down, of course, I had to come.

She was in a surprisingly gracious humour, and I could not decline to allow her deft fingers to do what she assured me they itched to do—to smooth out creases, to reset my wig, and to rearrange my neckerchief. And to these kind offices she added a lengthy lesson in the art of holding a hat with dignity and ease, in distinguishing by salute his Majesty from a Minister, a noble from a nobody, above all, a lady—they were her words, not mine—who was a wife from one who was not and preferred not to be. How the Graf would have chuckled to see her sweeping curtseys to me as I advanced through a room full of imaginary gallants and magnificent dames (in this case the clothesless gods and goddesses of the tapestry), obeying her adjurations to turn out my toes and look languishing, to cover all but a corner of my heart, to take snuff in elegant confusion of handkerchief, and to squeeze—but there I promptly refused—a lady's fingers tenderly as one bent over them.

"*Herr Gott!*" she exclaimed, "you can say more in a second then than if you had your arm about her waist. But only kings and the vulgar do that. Will you not try," she pleaded, wickedly, mincing up to me, "just once?" and she sank on her heels, ogling me over her fan.

"Tell me instead," I said, "something of the lady I am to visit. Who is this Princess Lubomirska?"

"The Princess Lubomirska!" she repeated, straightening her knees with a snap. "Oh! Lord! you are simple! Why, she—she is the chief lady in love with the King."

"The what?"

"The chief lady in love with the King," she put a plump finger on her nose.

"But is there not a Prince Lubomirska?"

"Of course there is. He is the Kron-Oberkammerherr,

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Monsieur, the Lord Chamberlain in Poland. But bless your soul ! that does not make any difference."

" Ah ! " I cried triumphantly, " now I know. " The secret of " The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg " was out at last.

" Oh ! it 's no use pulling a long face, " she said, giggling mischievously. " Most people call her *La maitresse régnante*, first fiddle for the present, *wissen Sie ?* "

" Then it is not a secret ? " I stammered, crestfallen.

" Pray, who said it was ? A secret ! *Herr Gott !* why, the varlets in the streets could have told you. " She threw back my look with a coquettish shamelessness that mad-dened me.

" She won't last long, the Princess, " she said, consolingly, staring at the goddesses in a comical way. " When she has ripped a bit longer they 'll shut her up in a convent like the Königsmark and the rest of 'em to repent. Oh ! they repent finely, particularly when they know there are plenty more to take their place, plenty. "

" Madam, " I said, sternly, " I am ashamed of you. Remember you are a woman, I beg, and that you are talking with a man. "

" As if I could forget it ! " she showed an inch of pointed tongue. " Women in Dresden are never allowed to forget their sex, M. Martin—by the men. "

Down she sank on her heels, for she was bent on shocking me.

" Have you no charity ? " I demanded, indignantly.

" Charity ! *Du lieber Gott !* It takes a woman a lifetime to learn charity—charity, forsooth ! and we women in Dresden have other and pleasanter things to do. Charity, indeed ! There is only one woman I care two straws about. The rest may go to the devil ; it 's all the beasts are fit for. Yes, there is one, and you have n't an idea who she is. "

" It 's yourself, I suppose, " I said, as cuttingly as I could.

" Pfui ! " was all she was provoked to reply, with a toss of her head. " Pfui ! that 's not pretty, but—you shall guess

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when you return, and perhaps I will say if you are right, perhaps," she curtsied. "Now, for God's sake, don't go chattering of these things to his Excellency, and don't, I implore you, jump at anything you see——"

"What do you mean?" I was quite frightened.

"Well, you will jump. So, if you value your skin, keep your mouth shut."

"Can you tell me anything of the Princess Rapirska?" I began, having returned to my puzzled thoughts.

It was Fräulein Kätchen, not I, who jumped. "What do you know of the Princess Rapirska?" she demanded, fiercely.

I stared at her. Then I recalled what the Graf had said.

"Don't you dare to mention her name again," she panted out, "or I shall be really angry. I won't have it, I won't."

"But——"

She was inspecting me closely.

"It is time for you to be off," she said, with a baffling smile, "and I will not answer any more questions, not one. So don't fidget and waste my time."

Protests were useless. I was packed off more mystified and miserable than ever.

Twenty-four hours had not diminished his Excellency's gracious temper; surrounded by his flatterers and his minions he received me with no less than enthusiasm.

"The very soul of punctuality!" was his remark as the brilliant circle nudged each other at my sombre apparel. "Quite right, quite right. The punctual man is the man who succeeds." And he condescended so far as to offer me a pinch of snuff from his own princely box.

I could scarcely believe my senses when I found myself bumping over the stones with no one but his mighty self for company. It must have been an edifying spectacle to the crowd of gaping hangers-on—M. Martin in the dress of a tutor sitting beside the would-be master of Dresden tricked

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out like a fop of three-and-twenty, and as full of high spirits as a country wench about to be led out on the village green by a beribboned bumpkin. Yet how speedily my stern resolutions of cunning and silence dribbled away at each turn of the wheels with this human tomb of evil mysteries rubbing against my sleeve. For all his fine clothes, his Excellency could not wipe away the wrinkles that hard living and wine had scored in his face, nor could his star and jewels and his perennial smile make his foxy, bloodshot eyes young and bright. One wag of that snuffy finger and my knees were loosed ; one leer on those cruel lips set horrible twitches clutching at my throat.

" You did not get on particularly well this morning ? " he startled me by saying in a confidential whisper, while he chuckled at my despairing surprise. " Never mind, do not be downcast. It is my business to find out these things, and if I could not do it better than most I should not be enjoying your pleasant society at this moment. You are a model of discretion, my dear M. Martin ; that is what his Majesty likes, and we all like what his Majesty likes."

" Count Karl positively refuses to go," I said, determined he should have the truth.

" You would reproach me for not having spared you the trouble," he replied, coolly, " yet, as you will have to try again——"

" It is vain to try again, Excellenz."

" Dear me ! what an obstinate young man it is ! " he murmured. " Let us talk of something more exciting."

" Does your Excellency refer to the charming obstacle ? "

He nudged me playfully. " Pfui ! " he chuckled. " No, I did not mean that delightful woman. But it is refreshing to see *you* have not forgotten her. No, I was thinking of some important news we have recently heard. You can guess, I am sure." He peered into my face.

I racked my brain. The news of the Swedish troops must be very stale by this time.

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"The King of Denmark is dead," he whispered, "and—there is a new King."

"But, Excellenz, what has that to do with Count Karl?"

"This is the palace of the Princess," he cried, putting the window down, and had I really been certain he heard my question I believe I might have struck him for his devilish ingenuity in so wantonly torturing a poor student.





CHAPTER XI

THE SALON OF THE MAÎTRESSE RÉGNANTE

I FOLLOWED his Excellency escorted by a whole army of footmen till the bewildering babble of human voices and musical instruments smote me with fresh fear and devouring interest. I felt rather than saw three large rooms full of men and women in the gayest attire, men and women whispering, laughing, chattering, simpering, curtseying, ogling ; before my eyes shifted a misty panorama of satin-coated and beruffled gentlemen, of cups of chocolate and beakers of wine on trays, of jewels sparkling on white bosoms, of ribbons, patches, and fans, of swords and circling hats, of rustling, swirling skirts. All these men and women were here, as I was, to do honour to the *maîtresse régnante* ; to join, as I was not, in the mad scuffle for place and power.

"Princess," I heard his Excellency say, bowing so that you could have seen his nose through his legs, "permit me to present to you one of his Majesty's most faithful servants, M. Martin."

I hope I remembered Fräulein Kätchen's lessons ; I know I stared with a passionate eagerness, and simply knew I was utterly wrong. The Princess Lubomirska was not the Fräulein's "mother." Splendid she certainly was in her gorgeous blue and white satin and profusion of jewels ; and though most men, under the spell of her matronly and voluptuous charms of person and her radiant, highbred face, would have readily agreed to call her a beauty, and worthy

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to be the mistress of any king, to my mind she was commonplace, almost plain, when compared with the dark-browed, pale woman whose lustrous eyes of indefinable witchery, and tall, slim figure, supple and graceful as a panther's, held the secret of "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg." I was permitted to win a condescending smile, and then his Excellency took me away.

"His Majesty has not yet arrived," the great man whispered, "but he is expected very shortly. Do you go meanwhile, and let everybody see you. You will find it amusing; you may discover, too, more friends than you think."

My entry with his Excellency had created quite a flutter. Magnificent dames in corners whispered to their cavaliers; magnificent cavaliers whispered back with knowing looks. Some went so far as to smile, to invite my company, as the quality may dare to do. Heavens! what a scene it was! And these men and women were acting as if it were enjoyment. Enjoyment! Their laughs were hollow; their faces, masks trained to be agreeable; their gestures, the gestures of puppets. At last I was in the real world,—the world of men and women who helped to make and unmake kings and the mistresses of kings, kingdoms and their statesmen, and it was as patent a sham as they would have me believe was the world of the bookworm; it was cruel and repulsive, which the student's world assuredly is not. Behind the jewels and the satin and the lace and the powder, behind the sparkle of the eye, the gusto of a pinch of snuff, I read nothing but lust in all its myriad human forms—lust of power, lust of money, lust of intrigue, and with them walked, unashamed and naked, jealousy, envy, malice, and, vilest of all, the carnal lust of the body. Never had I seen men on whose features, in young and old alike, heartlessness and selfishness were so plainly written with the Devil's fingers of fire; never had I seen women so decorously shameless, so elegantly immodest, so of the earth earthy. Look where I would, it was the same—a group of sparkish nobles making love to a



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harridan in brocade and diamonds who had forgotten everything but the vices of youth—a knot of ladies basking in the insulting flattery of a Minister—a tableful of gamblers robbing each other, dice-box in one hand, brandy in the other, and the finest of phrases on their courtly lips. Greeted effusively by some of the libertine circle of poor Karl, I fled only to be enveloped in the salute of the bejewelled Jezebel who had led the revels, and from her almost to fall into the arms of the wanton Marie, with bodice lower than when she had refused to sit on the knee of that foppish son of Belial. One thing I observed,—a trifle, to be sure,—that all the women drawled with the faint lisp which had surprised me in the dark lady of the Fräulein's hostelry. Later I discovered that it was merely one of the hundred tricks affected by the women of quality at Court to distinguish them from their commoner and happier sisters, something like the fashion in negro pages who here strutted about in tabards of peacock's feathers in attendance on their languishing mistresses. Bah! was it among these actors and actresses, so tired of their parts, yet unable to stop playing lest in the unholy jostle they should be thrown down and trampled upon, that my Lord Bengt had discovered the truth of the philosophy of Mr. Hobbes? Was it in this merciless throng that my Lord Karl had learned his lesson that love can neither be bought nor sold? And it was from this merciless throng that I had vowed to save him,—save him for my Lady. Yes, he would be happier far even with simple Greta at her spinning-wheel in the recess in my Lady's gallery chanting her peasant's lay, while her Dalecarlian eyes followed the gulls with the winds of the Baltic in their wings. But how, how was it to be done—by me? I spied a little alcove where I might be alone. A step—I leaned against the wall sick with an indescribable terror. For there—there in that alcove sat Fräulein Kätchen's "mother," and looking into her eyes was Karl, quite oblivious of all else. And that—that was the woman whom he loved, that was the Princess

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Rapirska, she whom I had seen—oh, God ! it was too horrible ! And he did not know what I knew,—no one but Kätchen and the swarthy Apollo King in his Elephant Order and I ; yes, one other man knew, and his blood had stained the carpet of the parlour and the stones of the foul courtyard. I stared spellbound ; a wedding-ring gleamed as she placidly rocked her fan to and fro ; she lifted her eyes and they rested on me. We looked at each other for one second, a second that was an eternity, and then her eyes passed over my head. I had forgotten : an introduction in the parlour of “ The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg ” was no introduction at all. But for all that I continued to stare in stony horror until his Excellency’s voice rasped on my ear. “ Your instinct is perfect,” he whispered ; “ study her well. Have I not kept my word and is she not a charming obstacle ? ”

I searched his face, my heart beating. No, thank God ! the King’s secret was not yet known to the man who talked with Herr Patkul in his closet.

“ What is her name ? ” I asked, hoping against hope.

“ She is the Princess Rapirska,” he muttered carelessly, watching me all the while. “ You have heard of her before ? ” he added, sharply.

“ Yes, at Polenstjerna.” Terror fortunately made my reply listless.

He had fixed his eyes on the pair, the eyes of a cat whose claws are deep in the back of a mouse, mauled, and not for the first time. “ I ’ll be bound the Graf von Waldschlösschen spoke of her,” he remarked with a leer ; “ gossip here made very free with the name of our friend the Graf, for he has excellent taste in his friendships ; but never believe gossip in Dresden, my dear M. Martin, it is always wrong. By the way, the husband is just behind you.”

He covertly indicated a foppish debauchée, sixty years of age at least, now engaged in quavering gallantry to that painted minx, Marie, and she, too, had a wedding-ring on her finger.

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"It is not a pretty spectacle, that," chuckled my guide. "The Prince Rapierska might at least make love to his own wife in public. She is worth it, eh?" His bloodshot eyes gleamed.

Happily I was saved the pain of answering by a flourish of trumpets and a general movement in the rooms. "Ah!" said his Excellency, "his Majesty has arrived."

Everyone had sprung to his feet, dice-boxes and brandy glasses were hastily put down, as the royal Hercules sauntered in, gracious, gorgeous, affable, and kingly. The men were bowing to the knee, the ladies saluting to their heels, as he passed along with a smile here, a word there, a friendly nod, a playful tap of the fingers, or a small joke. Blessed were they who won a glance, more blessed they who picked up a word; damned were all who found neither. His Sultan's eyes roamed over the ladies, lingering on this bright cheek or that jewelled bodice. "They are mine," these Apollo eyes said, and they called out a silent and eager echo: "Yes, we are yours, we would be yours, perhaps we are."

This was the second king whom I had seen in all the pomp of his Court, and I would have given all the splendour and royal grace of Friedrich August by the Grace of God Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, for one more glimpse of that young lad, sprung from the loins of ancestors who had created a nation from a tribe of downtrodden peasants, a king in his blue coat and boots an inch deep in summer's dust, striding past and leaving the air smitten with a mighty frost. The Apollo King before me was the king of the picture books; a king to be loved and hated as one can love or hate princes; a king to be admired for his kingly trappings and to be forgotten: that other, in the North, was one who made a tutor feel greater than he had ever dreamed; a leader to fear, to follow, to adore, and to die for with cheerful pride.

The Princess Rapierska had risen too; his Majesty was

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passing our little group. His Excellency, of course, was singled out for particular notice, but the Princess hardly received a smile, and as for myself the King simply did not see me. I observed, however, that the Princess's eyes stealthily followed his Majesty to where he now stood chatting apart with his *maîtresse régnante*. They pained me—those lustrous eyes. “First fiddle for the present,” they said, “*for the present.*” Alas! the Princess was, as other women in Dresden, of the earth earthy.

The King beckoned with his hand.

“Come,” said his Excellency, “it is your turn now.” The crowd fell back respectfully, but I wonder if my guide heard the whispered remark that drifted into my hearing. “Who is the old devil going to ruin now?” a voice had murmured as we advanced, bowing, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

There, in the face of the envious crowd I was presented; and I could not help admiring how the King did not betray by so much as the quiver of an eyelid that we had met already. I think I must have succeeded too, for his Excellency was clearly disappointed at his master's coldness. What was said in the quarter of an hour which followed I do not know; I can only recall the sentences with which I was dismissed.

“I hope,” his Majesty remarked with a twinkle in his dark eyes, “that you are a good swordsman, M. Martin.”

“Very indifferent, sire, I fear.”

“Pray practise, then. All my servants should be—tutors of their weapons, for in Dresden, alas! you never know when you may need all your skill. You can do me no better service than to practise. You will remember that, M. Martin, I am sure.”

The gay laugh that sent me again into the throng set the tongues wagging in a subdued Babel. It is a mighty curious feeling for a humble student to read in the faces of proud women that he is no longer a nobody, but one who, if he

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there and then presumed to make love to them in public, would be positively welcomed. My bejewelled Jezebel tossed me a caressing smile, and that painted minx, Marie, looked as if she would put her arms round my neck at our next meeting at a supper table. Stranger still, I perceived that a man in the royal favour may double his attractions by affecting the air of a monkish hermit. Assuredly not one of these women so ready to pet me would have believed that really I cared not one whit for all they could offer—not one whit ; but, stay ! I was wrong. To my corner stole a faint “ Bravo ! ” I started ; it came again, floating from behind the careless fan of the Princess Rapierska, as she departed, head in air ; and more thrilling than the “ Bravo ! ” was the enchanting gratitude which for one moment illumined the lustrous indifference to M. Martin and all in his company. I had hated her at Polenstjerna ; I longed to hate her now, the woman who had broken her vows to God, and was helping to wreck the life of my Lady’s cousin, but hate her I could not ; and that whispered word, that look, was the first thing which had given me any pleasure all that day. Shame, shame, that it should be so ! but it is the truth.

The coach wheels had scarcely commenced to rumble when his Excellency turned to me. “ I congratulate you, my dear sir,” he said in his silkiest tones. “ The King has taken an extraordinary liking to you. You make me,” he pursued, “ quite jealous. May I advise you to be careful ? Some of our charming friends yonder have also taken a liking to you, and I do not wonder. Do not let them ruin a promising young man. I know them only too well. Young men will be young men, so use your friends, play with them, but ”—he laid a finger on his cracked and rouged lips—“ keep them in your power.”

Oh ! the inexpressible vileness of his toil-worn, wine-tryed eyes.

“ Excellenz,” I said, bluntly, “ I would not cross the street to oblige one of them.”

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"Fie ! fie ! my dear sir, that is absurd. If you desire to rise you must go down on your knees to the ladies. A young man, heigho ! can do so much by presuming on his youth. And remember, some doors only women inspired by a young man can unlock. When the women have unlocked them be sure to keep the women on the outside. Our friend, Karl Polenstjerna, has forgotten that little truth, and I should be sorry to see you in his shoes."

Something was coming. He had not talked so earnestly with his Majesty, nor studied the *maîtresse régnaute* so cynically for nothing. Accordingly I kept my mouth shut.

"Do you stay long in Dresden ?" he inquired, smoothing his wig forgetfully.

"Your Excellency knows the answer better than I do," I replied, cautiously.

"A model of discretion," he murmured, staring admiringly at the shepherdess on his snuff-box. "I have a suggestion to make. What would you say to a little journey to Polenstjerna ?"

"To Polenstjerna !" How impossible it was to keep one's mouth shut !

"To be sure, while the trenches are being dug for the final storming of the breach."

"I cannot leave Dresden," I said, hastily, and his eyebrows went up. "I am pledged to stay in Dresden until Count Karl leaves."

"Ah !" I felt the cat's claws unsheathing gently. "To a lady ?" he inquired playfully, "a lady whom I understand you would not disoblige ?"

"It is the Fru Countess Polenstjerna," I said. It was not a very black untruth, yet it made me scarlet.

"Ah !" He patted the shepherdess mockingly. "That is indeed unfortunate."

The coach had stopped. "You shall sup with me," he said, laying a claw tenderly on my arm, "and we can talk as we eat."

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And up to his closet we went, where we found a table laid for two. So his Excellency had expected my company. "You shall take my niece's place," he remarked ; and just as I was convincing myself this was an unnecessary falsehood his "niece" bounced into the room. One glimpse, however, of my lugubrious visage caused her to fly as unceremoniously, and a noisy titter of laughter rang in the antechamber.

"I am sorry," he proceeded, unabashed, "that the young lady is so ill-bred, but I am training her. Girls, M. Martin, do not learn so fast as men, as perhaps you have observed."

"I have seen your niece," I answered, boldly, "at Fräulein Kätchen's inn."

"Bless my soul ! you don't say so ! What good eyes you have ! What could she be doing there ? I must warn her. A young girl should not go where young men with nothing to do are lodging, eh, my dear sir ?"

"Perhaps," I said, dryly, "it should be the other way, Excellenz."

He wagged an appreciatively naughty finger, and to my relief dropped the subject, and for half an hour we busied ourselves with the supper, which was worthy of my host. Presently he commenced to chat in the most easy and confidential way of politics, and you may judge how I listened. Like the Graf and my Lord Bengt he spoke of nothing but ever-blackening clouds lowering on the horizon—the hush that ushers in the storm ; and the clouds, as the Graf had hinted, invariably gathered round a crown—a sickly king in England, an ambitious king in France, a Titan voluptuary in Dresden, a barbarian king in Muscovy, a mad and dying king in Spain, a new king in Denmark, above all a boy king in Sweden. More than once he recurred pityingly to this boy King, surrounded by jealous, implacable, and secret enemies. He was certain, too, that the coming storm would burst first in Sweden. France and Holland, Spain and the Empire would be involved, but it was Sweden, Sweden, Sweden, which would feel the early and worst blasts of the hurricane.

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"You are surprised at my frankness," he wound up, coolly, "but unless you understand the position of affairs you cannot grasp the importance of the service which you can do his Majesty by returning to Polenstjerna."

"I confess, Excellenz," I answered, "I do not grasp even now how——"

"What was the last piece of news which you learned at Stockholm?" he interrupted, calmly.

I told him the truth—the order for Swedish troops to proceed to Schleswig-Holstein.

He put his hand approvingly on my knee. "And what did I tell you this afternoon?"

"That a new king had ascended the throne in Denmark."

"Exactly."

"Then there will be war?" I cried, trying to pierce his crafty face.

"Perhaps—perhaps not," he murmured. "At present we have nothing to do with that. But," he paused, as if he desired to speak and yet feared, "but if there is war the King of Sweden will be so busy that he cannot possibly attend to anything else."

I had expected some thrilling secret, and there he was chuckling because he had said what any loafer in a coffee-house could have told me.

"And I am to return to Polenstjerna to tell the Frau Gräfin that?" I asked, in scornful dudgeon.

"The Graf von Waldschlösschen, not the Frau Gräfin," he corrected, quietly.

"But I, Excellenz, why must I——"

"Reflect, my dear sir," he replied, his voice steeped in guile. "You have been tutor at Polenstjerna. What more natural than that you should return?"

Ah!

"I am dull," I said; "yesterday your Excellency desired me to stay and persuade Count Karl to return, and now——"

"Do not distress yourself," he said, soothingly. "Have

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you not forgotten that our friend Karl Polenstjerna's affairs can be settled only by"—he grinned—"the King of Póland—and the King of Sweden."

"War," I exclaimed, triumphantly, "will prevent a settlement."

"It generally prevents a good many desirable settlements," he answered, sagely.

Ah !

"Count Karl," he pursued, "is in a very delicate position. To speak plainly, he is in great danger."

"Will your Excellency not speak more plainly?" I pleaded.

"By all means. The Princess Lubomirska is a friend to Count Karl, but," he leaned forward to whisper, "supposing that another lady ousted the Princess and she were no friend to Count Karl?"

I started violently. Could it be that——

"Where would Count Karl be then?" he asked, "ruined over there, ruined here,—no nothing, as my niece puts it."

I had a horrible suspicion that he was lying, but lying to conceal the truth, which was worse than what he said.

"And who is this lady?" I demanded.

He looked at me much amused. "Ah ! we must not mention names. That would be uncharitable gossip. But many of us in Dresden think favouritism even in an admirable king is bad. The Poles have had their turn, and some of us hold that the next,"—he waved his hand,—"the next must be a German, a good, honest Saxon who will—reign in a good, honest Saxon court."

The King, forsooth, was to change his mistress as he changed his coat, at the bidding of his State valet. Bah ! his Excellency had not reckoned on what a bookworm had discovered in a parlour at "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg."

"For the present," he continued, watching me closely, "I am against that party. Unfortunately, however, in this

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Court where so few are honest one must swim with the tide. It is deplorable, *mais que voulez-vous ?* Sooner or later the Princess Lubomirska will feel it desirable to retire to a convent," he grinned, "and should the honest Saxon lady take her place, we might be obliged to fight on the side of Denmark against Sweden."

"What !" I interrupted, in sudden agony.

"Ah ! I perceive you grasp the situation at last. Things are not so bad as you think" (he smote his knee resolutely).

"I can stop it,—no, you can stop it, yes, you, M. Martin."

"I, Excellenz ?"

"There I regret infinitely that I am not at liberty to explain. I have spoken almost too freely as it is. But I knew I could trust you. Believe me," he was very much in earnest, "everything turns on the Graf's getting an answer at once to his communication, and the messenger must be one who does not arouse the suspicions of enemies only too sharp-eyed."

I sank back in my chair, reflecting. It might be all a pack of lies ; it might be his Excellency was deceived. In a horrible agitation I studied his face attentively ; I dwelt on his earnest tones. Yes, some terrible business was on foot, and the fortunes of Count Karl were involved, perhaps the fortunes of the whole Polenstjerna family, and somehow the Princess Rapierska was involved too. His Excellency had so devilishly mixed lies with the truth that it was impossible to feel more than that, but that was enough,—too much. I rose quickly.

"Would it help matters," I asked, slowly, "if Count Karl were to return ?"

"That would indeed be best of all, but you have convinced me it is impossible."

"May I have twelve hours to think about it ?"

"Take forty-eight. On my honour, if you go, you may yet save Count Karl. If you will not, things must take their course."

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The threat was unmistakable. If looks meant anything, the Polenstjernas and some others would find short shrift at those merciless hands.

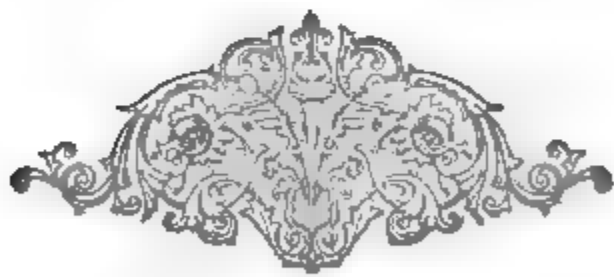
"I am exceedingly obliged to your Excellency," I said, "and when I have reflected——"

"Then," he answered, smiling, "you will find the packet here."

I bowed low.

"Pray, do not hurry away," he said, with the greatest cordiality. "Will you not stay and drink a bottle of Burgundy with me and," he chuckled, "make the acquaintance of my niece? She can be very amusing."

But I begged to be excused. His threats had torn into shreds and tatters the veil of doubts which had clogged my brain. A fever of resolution boiled within me. Ah! what would his Excellency say if I kept my promise to the lady,—if I took the packet and Count Karl with it? For no less than that was my idea now.





CHAPTER XII

M. MARTIN SURPRISES EVERYONE, INCLUDING HIMSELF

AS I stepped into the dark street the measured tramp of men and horses marching struck my ear. Long lines of horse and foot with some pieces of artillery were filing past and heading for the gates to the east. It was, in short, a tiny army equipped for the field which was shifting its quarters. Comparing the soldiers as critically as I could with those I had seen at Stockholm, at once I agreed they were more like the soldiers of my fancy, the officers in particular, and they swung smartly along with an agreeable military air. Yet I was not wholly satisfied. I missed in their faces the unquestioning calm of those dusty peasants, and I could not get out of my head the idea that these were men who could fight; those others in the North, men who could die. The student of books, you will observe, is always a willing prey to the notion—to be found, for example, in M. Machiavelli—that when it comes to push of pike a good citizen is worth two hired soldiers.

The last waggon had disappeared reverberating. And so full was I of the plan now careering wildly in my head that I had no time to ask what soldiers were doing, marching in the dead of night through the streets of Dresden. Indeed, so careless was I that I boldly approached the parlour without so much as a fear that I might be disturbing his Majesty a second time. Fortune, however, is indulgent to drunkards and bookworms, and as I scrambled in at the open window I

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met with no worse surprise than the apparition of Fräulein Kätchen, who popped out on me from behind a curtain.

“What a gay spark it is!” she cried, wagging her red head. “Pray, was his Excellency already so drunk that you must come away thus early?”

“It is no time to joke, Madam,” I answered, shortly. “I must speak with you at once and where I cannot be seen or heard by anyone but yourself.”

“La!” she mocked. “Remember, I am a woman talking with a man, and it is near eleven o’clock, when honest folk are asleep. Pfui! I am ashamed of you! Have you no charity?”

She brushed me away with an apron on which the tallow of her brandished candle was dripping.

“Be reasonable, mistress,” I said, humbly; “tell me at least how I can reach the house of the Princess Rapierska.”

The candle dropped. “The Princess Rapierska?” she repeated, and came to a dead stop; “are you mad, M. Martin?” I could almost hear her heart beating behind the trembling elephant on her bosom.

“Mad? no! But I must see the Princess alone to-night, —to-night, do you hear?”

“*Du lieber Jesus!* Perhaps you would like to find her supping with his Majesty, eh?”

Pah! I had not thought of that, jack-pudding that I was! My plan dropped like the candle. Fräulein Kätchen stood sucking her thumb.

“Is it very important?” she inquired, in a low voice.

“Yes, very. It concerns your mistress as much as it does me. Oh! Kätchen,” I implored, “be a kind woman and fetch the Princess. You can do it. I know you can.”

“A kind woman! My faith! you remember my name very prettily when you please. Most men can,” she tossed her head.

“Now you will?”

“Pouf!” she replied, pettishly. “The Princess is at her

palace. You forget his Majesty's spies, and the Prince's spies, and his Excellency's spies. Perhaps the King is there, and the town is alive with troops, curse 'em ! Every other night troops marching, always at night. A plague on the ministers and their plots ! ”

I did not listen. I watched the Fräulein's face anxiously as she twiddled at her elephant in perplexity. Suddenly she stepped up to me and put her hands about my waist, making me jump with indignation.

“ Oh ! keep still ! ” she said, shaking me. “ I am not going to kiss you. I thought so,” she added with a rueful giggle; “ you could not get into my bodice with Elsa at one end of the laces and myself at the other, and Lord knows I am stout enough. Why the devil are men so tall and big ? Not even one of the Princess's petticoats would cover your ankles. You must, really *must*, see her ? ”

“ Yes, I must, if I have to run the gauntlet of all the spies in the kingdom.”

“ No, no,” she stamped her foot. “ Do you want to be found to-morrow in an alley, face upwards, like that rascal-lion the other night ? ”

“ Think, then. Think of something. See the Princess I must.”

“ Hush ! Sh ! ” She beckoned and stole across the hall to a small room, a most creepy, curious room, for it had no windows in it.

“ Stay here,” she whispered, “ and sit as quiet as death : and as you value your life don't unbolt the door till you hear three taps—so ” (she rapped her mystic knocks). “ Remember, too, his Excellency has friends, women, in the house. Adieu ! ” She carefully raised her skirts and gripped them tight with both hands, so as not to betray the slightest movement ; in a trice she was lost in the darkness.

If you have ever sat in a horrible room, pitch-dark, with the door bolted, and not a sound to relieve the throbbing, suffocating blackness you will understand how men may go

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mad in a single night. And all the time the thoughts darted like forked lightning across my mind. Would the Princess come? and if she did, how, in heaven's name, was I to say what I had planned? Great ideas born of the Burgundy of the masters of kingdoms are intoxicating in the light of the closet, but in the merciless darkness of a gruesome silence their charm oozes and oozes away.

Ha! what was that? the rustle of a dress; the blurred hiss of voices drifted in; I waited; pah! overwrought as I was I could fancy anything. I groped my way back to my seat and the tedious minutes dragged me into a numbing stupor. Three taps! was I dreaming? No; they were repeated. I stumbled to the door and unbolted it. Fräulein Kätchen stood before me, hooded and cloaked, her finger on her lips, impudence in her eyes. She was alone!

"Take the candle," she commanded, "and be as speedy as you can," and once more, gripping her skirts, she disappeared, noiselessly. Was I to follow her?

"Shut the door, if you please," came from behind me, and down went that wretched candle and was extinguished. Great heavens! the soft ripple of the Princess's lisping laughter moved across the darkness. "Here's a pretty to-do," she muttered, gaily. "But for God's sake, M. Martin, shut the door."

I obeyed with that light laughter caressing the pitchy dark.

"Princess!" I cried, in despair. No answer; the laughter had stopped. "Princess!" I repeated. Not a stir. Oh, fool that I had been!

A gleam of flame shot up; the Princess was placidly watching me from the other side of the room. She had entered by another door, which was now closing silently into the well-oiled grooves of the panelled wainscoting.

"Take my mantle," she commanded, "and put it along the floor of the doorway. We must not let them guess we are here."

She swung off her long Polish cloak. A blaze and glitter filled the room, for she was dressed in a marvellous dark red satin ; jewels flashed in her hair ; jewels flashed on her bosom.

“ Now you can light the other candles,” she said. “ I fancy I shall want to have a good look at you—perhaps you will wish to see me, too ! ”

But I could only stare at her, and she snatched the taper from my trembling hands with amused impatience, and lit the candles herself, moving, as the *Fräulein* had done, with her skirts held tight and well off the polished floor. Then she sat down on a settee and smoothed out the folds of her dress, not without covert glances all the while.

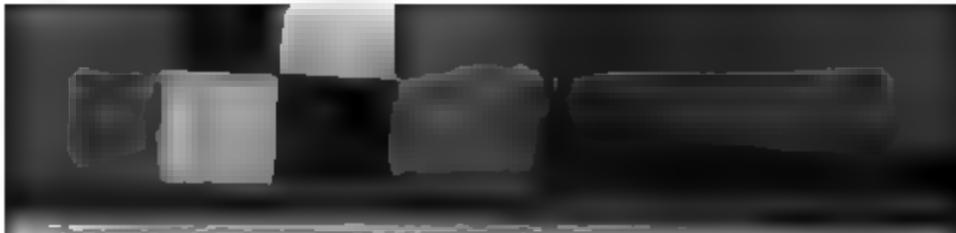
“ You sent for me,” she began, with a smile which mistook me for the Apollo King. “ I have obeyed. But I must beg you to be brief. Oh ! never mind that,” she remarked, as I bowed to kiss her hand. “ We have no time for such nonsense. I want you to speak and forget I am the Princess Rapierska ; forget, if you will, I am a woman.”

“ How can I do that, Madam ? ” How indeed could I, with the light falling on her red satin, adorning so perfectly the black eyes and hair and the dazzling whiteness of that incomparable neck and bosom ?

“ But you must,” she said, coolly. “ Surely you and I, of all people, need not stand on ceremony in ‘ The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg.’ ”

I was still dumb. I have never seen a more beautiful woman, not even my Lady—such ripe beauty of body with so marvellous an elegance and refinement. It was an exquisite privilege just to look at her, to see with what perfection of carnal loveliness God can endow a woman’s form, but—my poor toast at that supper party had mastered my will more easily than the Princess Rapierska.

“ Really,” she pursued, “ your luck is extraordinary. You send Kätchen to fetch me, and she finds me hurrying hither. For I, too, have something to ask—a favour.”



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"God bless my soul!" I cried, sitting down, while she burst into delighted merriment.

"You shall ask first," she replied. "And remember, a woman requires more time than a man, so be quick and blunt."

I had determined to be both. "Count Karl," I said, with an effort, "must leave Dresden."

"Ah!" she took her head sharply from the cushion. "Well?"

"Only one person can send him away, and that is you, Madam."

She made no reply, but fixed her eyes very attentively on my face.

"Madam," I asked in a low voice, "Madam, do you love him?"

She raised herself, an angry flush in her pale cheeks. "*Mon Dieu!*" she murmured, dropping back, "Kätchen is right. You can speak plain. Love him! that you of all men should dare to ask that question!"

"I will tell you why I dare. I have learned Count Karl loves your Highness as a gentleman of honour should love a woman."

"Indeed! that is interesting. Pray, how many other women does he love as a man of honour should?"

"You wrong him, Madam. He has been tricked and deceived——"

"Are men the only persons who are tricked and deceived?" she interrupted, coldly. But I declined to answer. There was a considerable pause.

"I understand," she said, briskly, "I am to send Count Karl away. Well, M. Martin, I am sorry, but I do not choose to help you. That is my answer, and it is only wasting time to talk about it further."

"Princess, that is all I had to ask," I said, bowing low.

She flashed a glance, half of disappointment that I was so *speedily* silenced.

"Then it is my turn," she said, briskly, "and I simply beg you to take his Excellency's packet." How she enjoyed my utter dismay!

"It pains me," I replied, promptly, "but, Princess, it is, I fear, impossible."

"You wish to punish me? That is, pardon me, stupid."

"God forbid! but I cannot, I really cannot, take the packet."

She roused herself. She was not accustomed to being thwarted—by a tutor. "But why,—why?" she questioned, with haughty fretfulness.

"Because I have promised not to leave Dresden until Count Karl leaves. Count Karl will not leave, so I stay too."

"Promised? to whom? a woman?" she inquired; could that be jealousy in her brilliant eyes? I studied them, calmly. "Yes," I answered. "I promised your Highness's cousin, the Countess Ebba."

She began to laugh, but she was not amused. "The packet," she said, in tones that thrilled me, "is of supreme interest to the Countess Ebba."

"I regret I cannot break my word," I answered. "Will your Highness pardon me if I explain that Count Karl, as his Excellency informed me, can carry the packet better than M. Martin?"

"Then you do wish to punish me? I could not have believed a man would be so spiteful."

As my mind was made up it was no use replying. We inspected each other with interest.

"What is it you desire to bring about?" she inquired, impatiently.

"Forgive my boldness, Madam," I answered, after cool reflection. "Count Karl is a ruined man; he refuses to return because he loves——"

"Loves?" she interrupted, scornfully. "Love! what is love? The passion of a young man for a beautiful woman, the desire of a young man——"

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“ That is not love, Madam. They call it love here, but, thank God ! they are wrong, and Count Karl knows it.”

“ You forget I can make him great,” she interrupted, in a low, eager voice.

“ Ah ! Princess, he asks for something much more difficult than that.”

“ Indeed ! and, pray, what more can a woman do for a man than make him great ? Karl is of my race, he will be of my religion, he will sacrifice himself for me, he will save me from—” she checked herself and rose. “ He will have my gratitude and I shall make him great. But love ! *mon Dieu !* I love but one man on this earth and you have discovered the man.” She flung her arms above her head with a superb gesture of passion and despair.

“ Then, Princess,” I said, “ I only ask you to tell Count Karl what you have told me and the packet will go to Polenstjerna to-morrow.”

She turned on me with a sweep of indignation. “ What ! You dare suggest it ? Tell him that ? Never ! I cannot—I cannot. It is an insult to my honour.”

I surveyed her unmoved. Honour ! To break the laws of God is nothing, but to confess your sin is an insult to your honour ! Honour, forsooth ! That a woman—a woman should mock her womanhood with such devil’s sophistries !

“ Your Highness knows Count Karl would not believe me,” I said, “ even if you gave me permission to tell him.”

“ But why, why must he know ? Oh ! it is monstrous—cruel !”

But her piteous appeal left me absolutely cold. “ Supposing,” I said, “ Count Karl returns, ignorant of the truth, he may be compelled to marry one woman when he loves another with his whole heart. And that shall not happen, as there is a God above ! For the packet, for his Excellency, for secrets of state I do not care that!—they can perish. No, Madam, Count Karl does not return to Polenstjerna until I

am sure he will not carry with him ruin to the mistress who has treated me, who am of no account, as her friend."

I stopped—how I had the audacity to say so much surprises me even now.

The Princess was gazing at me with intense interest. "Kätchen said you had curious ideas," she replied. "You certainly have."

"It is better," I urged stubbornly, "that my Lord Karl should hear the truth from your lips, Madam, than from——"

"What!" she cried. "Has his Excellency discovered——"

"Not yet. But there is a plot on foot—they would force his Majesty's hands, they would,"—I choked,—"and unless I—you—Count Karl will hear the truth then."

She clenched her fists. "It's that shameless Saxon jade!" she burst out, hotly. "It shall not be, I tell you it shall not be!"

"His Excellency will be on her side," I said, ruthlessly.

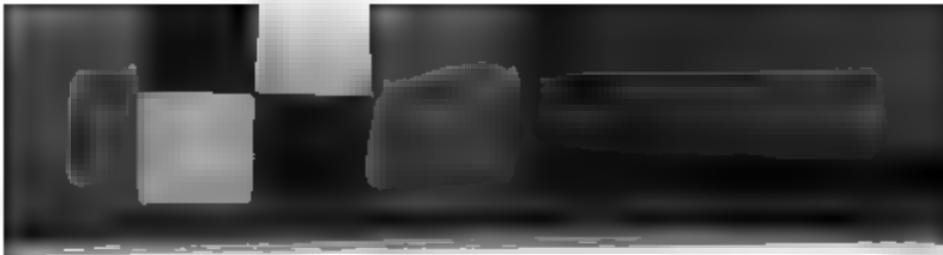
"Bah! Let them take care!" she cried, with an anger which blistered; and she commenced to walk to and fro, quite forgetting in her passionate thought the swirl of her satin gown in that room which prisoned her terrible energy. Presently she stopped in front of me, her dark eyes burning with a fever of hatred and resolve. "The packet must go," she pronounced: "it is the only way to thwart their vile intrigues. Ah! let his Excellency take care. I am not to be snuffed out like that. Yes," she held out her hand, "I will tell Count Karl, but on one condition——"

I waited. Not even her face and figure all aflame with Bellona's beauty made my pulse beat one stroke the faster.

"—that whether he goes or not you take the packet yourself."

I bowed, and could have kneeled at her feet for joy. How could she know, this Princess, ignorant of love, that she had asked me to do the one thing which I desired to do?

"It is a bargain," she said, smiling, and I bowed again,



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supremely happy. And yet men can be found who believe that duty on this earth of ours must always be its own reward !

" You are strangely confident," she said, " that Count Karl will go. I dare say you are right ; men are such queer creatures. But let me tell you, you are making a great mistake. Have you reflected on what you will find at Polenstjerna, you who have preached to me that marriage without love is a sin ? "

" Count Karl will return," I said, " to the home and the land of his birth. If God is good to him he will find what Dresden could never give him. Surely, Madam, that——"

" Pshaw !" she interrupted, scornfully, " you do not know what you say. But—tell me," she said, suddenly, " tell me of my cousin, the Countess Ebba." She seized a candle and held it so that the light fell on my face. " Is the Countess Ebba," she took away my breath by saying,— " is she more beautiful than I am ? "

I am sure my face flushed as red as her gown, but I answered her challenge bravely and I studied her for two calm minutes.

" No, Princess," I said, and it was the truth, " but she is as beautiful."

She broke into soft laughter. But, for all that, my discourtesy had strangely pleased her. " And now tell me," she said, " why could you not have the politeness to say I am more beautiful, as I am—I am," she repeated, with a defiance which well-nigh persuaded me to alter my opinion.

" You would not have believed it," I replied, calmly.

" *Ma foi !* but you are right. We women in Dresden are not blind. Ask Kätchen, ask myself ; we might go down on our knees to you—you, a tutor ; we might promise you wealth, honour, greatness, anything and everything that a woman can give a man, and you—you would not believe we were in earnest. But if that cousin of mine over the seas, a *slip* of a girl with pink cheeks and blue eyes, so much as

shakes her little finger, M. Martin of the stony, prudish heart is all of a flutter. Pouf ! you silly boy, you cannot hear her name without blushing like a chidden schoolwench. And you, poor, poor fool, you are bent on taking Count Karl with you—you who despise us."

"Despise ! God forbid, Madam ! But I pity the women of Dresden, because they are so unhappy."

" ' Pity ' ! was there ever such a man ? To tell a woman you pity her ! Strike her, cuff her, abuse her, but pity ! *Herr Jesus !* And if I am unhappy ? I would not change my unhappiness, no, not to be Queen of France or Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna. Pray, sir, are you so happy ? "

"It is enough for a tutor, Princess, to try to do his duty——"

"Duty !" her eyes flashed. "The name for what you desire to do. What fools men can be when a woman inspires the folly ! Wait a little, Monsieur Tutor ; the next time we meet——"

"I fear I shall never have that honour."

"Fear !" she laughed in my face. "For God's sake, M. Martin, be sincere, and don't prate to me of your conscience and your fears. It makes me quite faint. We shall meet, for all that. You do not know what I know, and it is good for you that you do not. Give me my cloak, or Kätchen will be rating me worse than you have done."

I had barely time to salute the tips of her fingers when she blew out the lights and left me with a mocking "*Au revoir !*" quenching the rustle of her vanishing satin robe.

Mindful of spies I crawled stealthily to bed by the ladder, tired and triumphant.

The next thing was to inform his Excellency, and at mid-day I was in his cabinet, explaining that I had come for the packet.

His eyebrows went up. "You decide very quickly," he remarked, taking a pinch of snuff.

"A night's sleep on your Excellency's wine and your

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Excellency's arguments can work wonders," I answered submissively.

He gave me the packet, smilingly repeating the now familiar injunctions as to secrecy. "And the Frau Gräfin?" he asked. "How will you explain your return to my esteemed friend? Stay, I will write a message."

"It is hardly necessary," I said, smiling too. "I travel with Count Karl at his request. He will doubtless explain."

"*Herr Gott!*" he exclaimed, sharply, dropping both snuff-box and packet. "I do not like jests."

"It is no jest, Excellenz. I am happy to say Count Karl has seen fit to change his mind. We leave Dresden to-morrow."

He drummed his utter incredulity into the lacquered table. "How the devil did you do it?" he demanded.

"Count Karl desired me to inform you that his return was due to you, Excellenz." They were my Lord's own words, and I had been straitly charged to say no more.

The great man grunted displeasedly; and for once he did right to be incredulous. "I congratulate you," he said, sulkily. "It is veritably a *tour de force*. I am sorry, however, you will not make the acquaintance of the charming obstacle. She is a remarkable woman, a most remarkable woman."

I smiled. The Princess was much more than remarkable. "When I return," I said, "perhaps your Excellency will repeat the offer to introduce me—if it is necessary."

"Sh! sh! ha! ha!" he chuckled. "You must come back, to be sure. I have never had a more promising pupil."

He had forgotten, as the skilled will, that in plotting, as in fencing, a simpleton may sometimes outwit a master, if he will only remember to behave as a simpleton. But if he imagined I would be fool enough to put myself within reach of his snuffy claws a second time he would be deceived.

He made no effort to detain me; for he was too busy with

his thoughts. "By the way," he said, slowly, "as Count Karl is going, after all, you must keep the packet a secret."

"Excellenz!" I came to a dead halt on the threshold.

"Count Karl has changed his mind, so have I," he explained, harshly, "and we shall hold you answerable," and with these pleasant words to correct the flattery which he had begun to heap on me I was dismissed.

Once in the air I laughed at his threats, hastening to my attic with a heart as blithe as a blackbird's in an English hawthorn in May. In three, four weeks would I not see the autumn suns on the Terrace at Polenstjerna?

"So it is you who are singing," said Fräulein Kätchen, putting a red head in at the door. "Are you gay because you are leaving Dresden?"

"I wonder, Madam, I wonder."

"Madam!" she threw up her chin, walked in and shut the door. "Madam, forsooth! Do you call every wench 'Madam' when you are gay, M. Martin?"

"How can I say? I have so little experience of women and of being gay."

"Experience, pshaw! You made a bubble of his Excellency, and you forced the Princess to do what I, yes I, could not."

"Well, his Excellency did not tell her the truth, you see."

"Nor I either? Thank you. So you like the truth, M. Martin?"

"From men, not from a woman, I think. Your Princess told me the truth last night, and it hurt me more than I can say."

She watched me loading my valise for a few minutes. "Give that to the Graf," she said, drawing a letter from her bodice. Then she stooped down. "Keep your eyes on Count Bengt," was the startling whisper which I heard.

"Count Bengt!" I sprang to my feet in terror.

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“ Hush ! hush ! Do you want to have me whipped and yourself locked up in the Königstein ? ”

“ You know *him* ? ”

Her merriment came back. “ He is not the only charming and stony-hearted gentleman from Sweden who has honoured ‘ The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg, ’ ” she replied, with an arch curtsey.

I stared at her ; my thronging thoughts could not find speech.

“ I tell you,” she said, simply, “ because I am grateful. You kept the Princess’s secret ; you sent for her last night to do her a service, and I would go down on my knees to the man who does the Princess a service. No, you are not one of the blabbing sort, for ever loafing round a wench’s apron-strings because you think she likes to have a man whispering a pack of lies in her ears. Five, six years ago,” she murmured, thoughtfully, “ the Princess took me,—never mind where I was taken from,—the Princess trained me, and now I am here, looking after—” she stopped. “ Were it not for the Princess you might have been putting on my shoes or my garter at the parties of——”

“ You, Fräulein Kätchen ! you——”

“ Oh ! don’t pretend you are shocked at the truth. I ’m not going to ask you to do it now. Remember, a girl in Dresden can’t pick and choose, and I never set up to be a prude. But so long as you stand by the Princess I stand by you. Is she not the most beautiful woman in the whole world, M. Martin ? ”

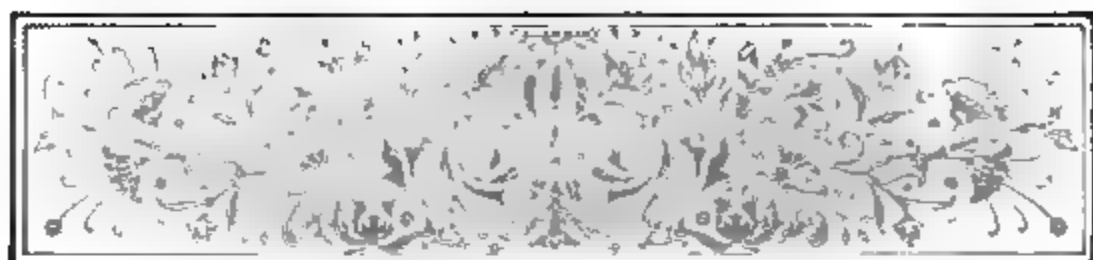
“ She is very beautiful, but it is a——”

“ Sh ! you sha’n’t say it, or I ’ll hate you. *Herr Gott* ! you, a man, who should be proud to kiss the hem of her petticoat ! There ! let me go, or that hussy will find us both here—and that will be the devil—for me ! His Excellency is just mad to find out how you did it : so remember what I said, and—*auf wiedersehen* ! ”

She paused in the doorway, held up the tiny elephant,

then raised her hand to her lips and tossed me the most impudent, wicked, and mocking kiss imaginable as her skirt whisked round the panels. Nor did I see her again before I rode out of Dresden in my Lord's coach with our faces turned towards Lübeck and Polenstjerna.





CHAPTER XIII

WHAT THE LIBRARY AT POLENSTJERNA HEARD

SO far Fortune had been on my side ; the season had been amazingly fine and dry ; but no sooner had we turned our backs on the spires of Dresden and the majestic Elbe when Nature poured out the vials of her malice on our heads. The rains burst pitilessly, and for ten days deluge after deluge made the roads impassable. Everything went wrong ; our baggage was lost ; our horses fell sick ; the coach broke down, and for three wretched weeks we fought our bedraggled way through mud and wind and water to Lübeck. No sooner there than a perfect tempest of gales swooped upon us from the north, and to sail for Stockholm was impossible. Worse still, my Lord was smitten with an ague and took to his bed. At once the north wind ceased, but as soon as the physician would permit him to travel, round it chopped again and fierce blasts roared like unchained spirits of evil in the chimney. I had reckoned to see King Eric's Tower in three weeks, but already ten had been wasted, and we were no further than Lübeck. Wasted ! no, not quite ; they had taught me more of my Lord Karl than I might ever have learned. Alas ! the daily lesson was far from comforting.

Naturally I discovered nothing of what had passed between himself and the Princess ; my Lord would not have suffered me to indulge my curiosity, nor had I any desire to pry into secrets sacred to one man and one woman alone. I

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was, however, permitted to understand that he had once and for all renounced the idea of paltering with his birthright and his religion, that his debts had been paid, and that henceforth he was saved to Sweden and the Protestant Faith. He left me to guess, which was not difficult, that Dresden had become hateful, that he could not rest until salon and gambling parlour were far behind him and the mighty forests of the North and the bears in the snow had not only cleaned the shame from his memories, but poured their healing balm into a sorely shattered heart. I was proud, stupidly proud of my success. Yet had I truly succeeded? "Saved!" yes, but for what? Of his intentions I could get no inkling. When we talked of the past or the present his friendly candour and charming frankness bridged the gulf that lay between the Herr Grefve Polenstjerna and the tutor, yeoman born. But did I dare a timid hint as to the future, a proud silence, a grave and stiff formality froze his speech, and M. Martin was unmistakably reminded that in the affairs of the future my Lord would not suffer his interference or receive kindly his advice. Day by day the wound in his heart was healing rapidly; he amazed me, for example, by repeatedly talking of the Princess Rapierska without a trace of resentment. Beautiful she still was in his sight, but she was fast becoming a mere beautiful memory which ten minutes at Polenstjerna would suffice to wipe out for ever; why, even now at the mention of his home his eye would brighten and his laugh would ring with the crackle of crisp snow under a young foot. And how perverse he was! Did I dilate on the joys of the Terrace or the gardens, he would rise, pace to and fro, irresolute, moody, pondering, eyeing me with a jealous suspicion of one who dreads his own thoughts, but dreads still more that another should read them. It was not a cheerful thing to see this fear of the future, while the wind roared along the quays and the rain churned the roads into morasses of mud, and I would steal away to finger with savage sadness his Excellency's packet

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and curse myself for embarking a second time on a fool's errand. The Graf was probably now sitting in Fräulein Kätchen's parlour in the warm corner by the stove, with the Burgundy at his elbow and a jest at bookworms on his lips. And at Polenstjerna my Lord would find the Fru Countess with her mother's sleepless ambition ; the Countess Ebba, once my pupil, who did not love him ; and my Lord Bengt, who warned me, and against whom I had been warned—and behind them all intrigued the sombre figure of his Excellency into whose snuffy claws the Polenstjernas and I had fallen.

The rumours of war grew louder. Lübeck was agog with news from every quarter. The Swedish troops had sailed from Carlsrona ; Swedish troops were mustering in Pomerania and Bremen ; Denmark was in arms resolute to resist ; neither the new King, nor King Charles, nor the duke would yield one jot. The princes of the House of Brunswick had promised to join hands with the Three Crowns of the Vasas to curb the insolent ambition at Copenhagen. I was assured that General Gyllenstjerna had received peremptory orders to march into Holstein, and only the rain and the mud had prevented an act which would be a declaration of war.

It was no time for Swedes to be prisoners in Lübeck. We hastily abandoned the sea and with the greatest difficulty travelled across Denmark disguised as Saxons in the service of the King of Poland and at last set foot in Sweden. Christmas had come and gone before the porter's glad horn answered the bells of our sleighs at the gate of Polenstjerna Castle.

With what vivid pleasure do I recall the great hall majestic in the glow of a roaring fire of Yule logs, the servants shyly peeping out and joyed at my Lord's condescension in remembering them, and the portraits of his ancestors smiling down at the return of one of their race, so nearly lost. My Lord had dropped on his knees to receive his mother's blessing ; Madam had greeted my humble self with a grace

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which banished the weary weeks of travel ; nay, she had thanked her son for bringing M. Martin back ; a pause, a rustle, a cry—and here is my Lady, virginal and queenly as ever, half running, half halting, because she was mistress and Countess Ebba, cousin and girl in one. Truly the Swedish tongue, after my own, is most fit for the lips of a beautiful woman.

My Lord stumbled to his feet, dazed bewilderment in his face. Two years ago and more he had left a girl, golden-haired and blue-eyed, who had romped with him on the Terrace and in the woods ; since then he had seen the beauties of the courts of Europe, and in a flash his eyes were unsealed, and not even the Princess Rapierska, for all her incomparable and ripe womanhood, was fit to touch the hem of the petticoat of this maiden cousin, the Fröken Grefvinna.

My Lady dropped her eyes ; two years had made the girl playfellow into a woman. And there by the portrait of the White Countess in the glow of the fire I left them.

The two minutes which had struck my Lord dumb had also made M. Martin the tutor again, a tutor without a pupil, happy that he was invited to sup with the family that evening. Here they never could know of his Excellency, of the emerald ring of his Majesty Augustus the Strong, of the windowless room in "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg." For them M. Martin had simply done his duty as a faithful servant, and, perhaps presuming on it, had returned when he said he never would. Yes, for M. Martin it was enough to have the sympathy of the Fröken Grefvinna's woman. Greta was quite excited ; she had seen my Lord in his furs, and doubtless his noble air and his cheeks delicate as her own, glowing, too, with the salutation of the biting air, was a pleasant sight for a maid's eye. She showed me with coy glee the locket which had come to her from Dresden, and she confessed she was mightily glad my Lord had arrived at last, for both Fru and Fröken Grefvinna had been hard to please all these lonely months.

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"That is the White Countess," I said, lightly. "You see it is you, not me, whom she has harmed."

My levity chased the gaiety out of her looks. "God knows, sir," she answered, with a catch of her breath, "it is not all over with the White Countess."

Yet before I could ask what she meant my Lady's hand-bell tinkled sharply and she fled.

"I hear," my Lady greeted me demurely in the salon before supper, "that M. Martin has supped with kings and ministers. So poor Polenstjerna must not disappoint you."

How could it? Its mistress had blossomed into a wonderful magnificence. Around her neck was the famous circlet of Russian pearls which had once heard the beating of the heart of the White Countess; her brocade of gold had come from the loot of Prague, her bracelets from Warsaw, and she, too, had a locket from Dresden on the fringe of her bodice. How the painted crowd at the Princess Lubomirska's would have whispered could they have seen her! Ah! at Dresden they could not find golden hair like that and cheeks that shamed the blushes of the dawn. Would that the Princess Rapierska were here to hold the candle and swallow her scorn! Scorn! I had compelled her to grant that more than magic lay in the little finger of this blue-eyed "child-cousin." And I thanked God his Majesty Augustus the Strong did not reign in Sweden.

Madam herself purred with ill-concealed delight because my Lord Karl could not keep his eyes away from his cousin's face. Shame to him had he done so. Dresden was indeed gone now, gone for ever; obedience to his mother had become a joyful duty. And my Lady, too, was touched; what woman would not have been by the homage of a noble who had seen the great world; of a cousin who proclaimed so gallantly that nothing could vie with what his own home could give him? Ah! yes, so far all was as happy as the bells of a wedding sleigh; but where was my Lord Bengt?

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After supper the Fru Countess took me to the library to play cards, away from the jests and the laughter in the alcove where my Lord chattered with gaze as rapt as in that nook in the salon of the Princess Lubomirska.

"You will pardon me," she said, leaning back in her chair, with a tiny cough of embarrassment, "but I am curious whether the rumours about my son, the rumours—were—ah—exaggerated."

The supper table rose before me. Pshaw! what was the use of talking about it? The women of Dresden and elsewhere had taught my Lord their lesson; it was disagreeable, to be sure, but he had returned to be obedient, and the rest was not such as should shock the delicate ears of quality.

Accordingly I replied I had not deemed it my duty to inquire into these things, and Madam was pleased to approve.

"I infer you did not have much difficulty in persuading my son to return?" she said, carelessly.

My answer was ready. "I did my best," I said, "that Count Karl should know the urgent reasons for his leaving Dresden, and he decided as he thought fit."

She smiled indulgently. This was all as it should be.

"Has my son," she demanded, after a pause, "spoken to you—of his intentions—his intentions for the future?"

"No, Madam." It was pleasant at last to be able to tell the whole truth, and the denial afforded her no small relief.

"Forgive my curiosity," she began, still embarrassed, "but I confess your return, M. Martin, surprised me. Will you not confide your reason to me?"

I explained I had two: her son's request and his Excellency's message, and I handed her the letter. She read it with avidity, then twisted the paper half-angrily in her fingers.

"Was this all?" she questioned, searchingly, and I was obliged to admit it was. "But did his Excellency," she pursued, "not speak to you of the packet?"

"Not one word after I had informed him I was ignorant

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of its contents and desired to remain so. I trust that was right, Madam?"

"Certainly, certainly." She rose as if the conversation wearied her. But I, too, had my question to ask.

"His Excellency," I said, as I bowed her to the door, "spoke highly of the services of the Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen."

"Ah! the Graf?" Madam was all interest.

"Yes, most highly. The Herr Graf has left Sweden, I suppose?"

I waited anxiously while her careless gaze swept over the folios above my head.

"I believe so," she answered. "I have not heard of him for many weeks," and she commenced to thank me again in flattering terms for my services. The words were polished and kind, but they rankled bitterly. We were simply tutor and Fru Countess. Of confidence and friendship she neither spoke nor did her bearing suggest a hint. I shut the door with pressed lips to stifle the proud rustle of her brocade.

That accursed packet! The Graf had departed and I had no right to be at Polenstjerna. What was I to do? Return to Dresden? No! a hundred times no! Not for all the packets in the world would I put my neck a second time into the nooses of the would-be master of Dresden. Return to England? Yes, but I longed, how I longed to abide where I was! It was folly, ridiculous folly, but the passion in my heart laughed at folly and vanquished shame. And with passion fought as an ally an overwhelming fear. Could I leave her, my pupil, to my Lord Bengt and the Fru Countess? Abandoned for two days to my own devices I spent them in feverish hesitation, tossed from one resolve to another, making plans one half-hour and tearing them to tatters the next. If someone would only decide for me! How often did the library not see me shake my fist in sheer despair at the folios which had once given me comfort and *now* so solemnly derided my puling cowardice!

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And so it came about that one wretched evening I had drawn up one of the great oaken chairs before the fire, flung myself desperately into a tome when — the crash of the falling book woke me with a start. Good gracious ! there on the other side of the fireplace, in another great oaken chair, sat my Lady, swinging her feet to and fro, her eyes ablaze with mocking fun.

“ I am come for a lesson,” she said, briskly. “ Greta, fetch your spinning-wheel. It will help to keep M. Martin awake.”

I sat still, having nothing to say, and content to watch the firelight play at hide-and-seek with the dainty curves of her figure.

“ Has not the world,” she asked, “ taught you, Monsieur Tutor, anything that you can teach me ? ”

“ Countess, I do not know.” She tapped impatiently on the floor, took up the fallen tome, and turned its pages restlessly, while Greta made a poor pretence of spinning. The book fell a second time.

“ You have told me nothing of Dresden,” she said; “ surely you must have something to relate ? ”

Something, great heavens ! “ Were it not for my Lord Karl,” I replied, slowly, “ I am sorry I have ever seen Dresden.”

She twisted the bracelet on her wrist, unlocked it, sniffed at the miniature, fidgeted, and closed the catch with a snap.

“ Was it,” she began, with an effort, “ was it—very difficult to persuade my cousin to return, M. Martin ? Tell me the truth as a favour, please.”

I was debating how to answer this earnest appeal.

“ It is true, then ! ” she burst out. “ M. Martin, did—did you see *her* ? ”

She flushed. Greta had been stopped by a knot in the wool.

“ Yes, I saw her.” Dead silence. “ But she is nothing,” I protested, quickly; “ the lady is nothing to him, and he is nothing to her. On my honour, Madam, it is the truth.”



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She listened, restlessly picking at her gown.

"You will tell me her name?" but I hung my head.

"What! You refuse?"

"Yes," I replied, with grievous reluctance, "I must refuse."

"You astonish me, M. Martin," she said, coldly, and I could only press my lips together and gaze at the fire.

She took up the tome, moved a page, and then flung it on the floor, which made poor Greta, still busy over the knot, jump and cry out.

"Do you return to Dresden?" she asked, quietly, and I saw with joy that her resentment had stolen up the chimney.

"Never!" I said, with more vehemence than I intended.

"Then you will stay here at Polenstjerna? I—we have need of you."

My silly heart leaped. Duty cried, "Go—go!" Passion whispered, "Stay—stay!" I strove to read an answer in her face, but she had turned to pore into the fire.

"Would it surprise you," she murmured, "that I am sorry I sent you to Dresden? Believe me, I am grateful for all you have done, but I wish, ah—*mon Dieu!* Karl is everything that you say; he has the heart of a Polenstjerna, but," almost with a sob, "I cannot marry him, I cannot! Do not ask me, M. Martin; do not let them ask me!"

I stumbled to my feet. At once Greta's wheel came to a sharp stop, and I checked the foolish words in time.

"I want you to stay," my Lady pleaded. "You will not desert me now? Tell me, you will stay?"

Perish the Graf and his packet! Duty and prudence crumbled away before a whirlwind of passion. "Countess," I said, "I shall be proud to stay until you bid me go."

"Thank you—I thank you from my heart. But can you not tell me what I ought to do? can no one tell me?" She flung herself back into the recesses of the chair. I might have been guilty of any folly—when the door opened.

"Bengt!" my pupil exclaimed, springing up in a flutter.

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"Bengt!" The frigid surprise was belied by the sudden radiance in her eyes, the quiver in her voice.

"Yes," he said, pleasantly, "it is I, come to pay my respects to a long-lost cousin—and to M. Martin," he bowed as if we had parted yesterday. "Am I disturbing a lesson—or a confession?"

"Neither, Herr Grefve," I answered, at once. "The Fröken Grefvinna would know more of Dresden than I am willing or able to tell her."

They both stared at this cool answer; they had forgotten I had been in the great world; and if I could face his Excellency and the Princess Rapierska surely I need not blench before my Lord Bengt.

"I will leave you together," my Lady interposed, somewhat stiffly. "M. Martin may reply to your questions, Bengt, if he will not to mine. Come, Greta."

My Lord watched her withdrawal with a slow smile. Then he deliberately sat down in the vacant chair.

"I congratulate you, M. Martin," he said. "You have achieved the impossible."

"Why the impossible, Herr Grefve?"

"It is not quite the word," he answered, still smiling. "Yet I had hoped you would not have been guilty of so grave a mistake."

"I ought not, then, to have returned?"

"Oh! pardon me, I spoke of my cousin. You," he surveyed me, "you are your own master."

"And so is my Lord Karl," I retorted, trying to keep cool.

"Well! hardly. If he had been left to himself, he would have decided differently. Is it not so?"

"I did what I was requested to do," I said, shortly.

"Of course. I do not blame you. Far from it. But if I do not err I am not the only person who regrets it."

"I do not understand," I replied, in savage bewilderment.

He laughed lightly. "Well, M. Martin, you for one are regretting it."

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"Herr Grefve!" I protested indignantly, but he only shrugged his shoulders, and gently pushed a log into the fire with his foot.

"You have seen Dresden," he pursued, "and you have seen my cousin. Was it really worth while to bring him back, knowing what you knew before you went and what you know now?"

"On the contrary, it was what I saw at Dresden that—" and I stopped. Plague on it! I was saying too much.

"Oh! pray, continue. This is quite thrilling."

"Count Karl," I said, stubbornly, "decided for himself. Whether he should come back or not was no business of mine. In all deference, Herr Grefve, I must leave you to discuss it with him and the Fru Countess, your aunt."

"Exactly," was the unruffled reply. "But have you not forgotten the Countess Ebba?"

His effrontery—really I could not call it anything else—was paralysing. I had rather run the gauntlet of three Count Flemmings than this bloodless disciple of Mr. Thomas Hobbes.

"The Countess Ebba," I was foolish enough to say, "is, I presume, her own master too?"

"Unfortunately, that is just what the Countess Ebba is not," he replied dryly, "or there would be no difficulty at all." He rose and walked up to me. "The question now," he said, "is what we are all going to do. You, I suppose, return to Dresden?"

"Herr Grefve," I said, with conviction, "I would not return to Dresden for all the wealth in the world."

He pondered on this confession for some minutes. "That is a pity," was his deliberate comment.

"What would you have me do?" I asked, both cross and surprised.

"I would have you," he said, "tell those who sent my cousin back that on their heads the consequences must rest."

Ugly words, but uglier far was the adamant resolve in

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the passionless eyes. I met his gaze bravely. He should know the truth.

"You make a mistake, Herr Grefve," I answered; "there is no 'they'. One man and one alone caused your cousin to change his mind, and that man is in your company at this moment."

He examined me coolly; and I was amazed to read the glimmerings of respect in his look.

"You would have done the same," I cried, "had you—discovered what I discovered. It was the only way to save an honest gentleman, and I did it with my eyes open."

"I am sure you did. But permit me to tell you that your work of kindness is only half done. Dresden is not the only place where my cousin may need saving, or where discoveries may be made. Perhaps you did not think of that, M. Martin?"

No answer was necessary; at any rate I had none.

"Let me remind you," he added, "that I am not using threats. I never threaten unless—" he smiled. "Frankly, it would be stupid at present. Perhaps, however, you have discovered, nay, I am sure you have, that the man who will ruin my cousin—is my cousin himself."

"If it is not a threat," I said boldly, "I cannot understand what you would mean, Herr Grefve."

"Then I will speak plainly. My dear M. Martin, there can be no hope for the man who, with his eyes open, is made a tool of by women."

It was a clean and smiling hit, which sent a shiver through me.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "I am helpless, and I fancy you are helpless, too. Follow my example if you are prudent, and wash your hands of the whole business or—you will regret it. And that," he added, smiling, "is not a threat but a prophecy."

Something in his eyes quickened my dull brain. "You have already seen my Lord Karl?" I cried.

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"Certainly," he answered, composedly. "And I find his story tallies so exactly with that of M. Martin that I ventured to speak out. You will excuse my freedom, but it is always interesting to hear the truth—from Dresden."

He turned on his heel and left me to digest his remarks at my leisure.

I took up the tome like my Lady and banged it on the floor, once, twice, thrice. A plague on my Lord Bengt! What a fool I was to imagine five or six days in Dresden would fit me to rout the philosophy of Monsieur Machiavell and Mr. Thomas Hobbes! And upstairs in my locked valise awaited me the packet for the Graf.





CHAPTER XIV

M. MARTIN MAKES A DISCOVERY

MY Lord Bengt promptly returned to Stockholm, and two days later he was followed by his aunt and both his cousins. The object of the visit, I was given to understand, was to present my Lord Karl to his Majesty, and I was graciously invited to accompany them. To their surprise I begged to be excused. I was sick of courts, and cruelly harassed in mind ; my spirit craved for a measure of repose to dispel the cowardice which had me in its grip. Solitude would perhaps guide me towards the light so sorely needed.

I misjudged myself completely. The student was no longer a student ; my study was a wearisome hypocrisy, my books a mockery and a sham.

Had I been a man and not the ghost of a bookworm I would have gone back to Dresden, or destroyed the packet and sought a refuge in my own country. But I could do neither ; the spell of the White Countess had bewitched my will and sapped my intellect.

And meanwhile, throughout the length and breadth of Sweden nothing was heard but drilling and recruiting, the mustering of troops, the casting of cannon. With the spring the Norwegian and the Dane would pour across the mountains, or strive to stride over the seas ; the Swede must fight in the Baltic, in Holstein, perhaps in the bowels of his own land ; and for what ? for what, in God's name ?

Peasant and noble and preacher asked that question, and

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the answer was that his Majesty was determined to preserve his cousin the Duke in what he deemed to be his rights. Behind the drilling and the recruiting seethed discontent and fierce mutterings for those who had ears to hear. Famine still pinched the country ; the peasant prayed for bread and they offered him war ; the " Reduction " continued ; the taxes had been increased, and lately a royal proclamation had laid a fresh and heavy contribution on his Majesty's subjects. What availed it to grumble, to argue, to denounce in secret ? Grey-haired statesmen might protest that it was midsummer madness to flout the repeated warnings of France, Holland, England ; the nobles might gnash their teeth at the new men who urged, it was said, his Majesty to desperate courses ; preachers—and there were such in Stockholm—might have the audacity from the pulpit to preach against the war and not obscurely hint that the Duke was he who troubled Israel. It was useless, perfectly useless. His Majesty had the power, and his Majesty pursued his way, silent, serene, inscrutable, irresistible, and unre-sisted. As well ask the north wind with the omnipotent frosts in its breath, Why ? wherefore ? whither ?

Whispers from the capital revealed a weird state of things. The Duke and the Duchess, his Majesty's favourite sister, had stayed in Stockholm. Musterings and reviews at which men's bones were broken alternated daily with bear hunts of a royally ferocious jollity ; masquerades and balls and plays flared through the night, and at any moment the sleigh bells might bring us news that the Swedes and the Brunswickers were over the Elbe, that bloody fighting had choked the trenches at Gluckstädt and Husum.

Worse still, ugly rumours murmured that the King of Poland, his Majesty Augustus the Strong, was itching to have his finger in this devil's cauldron ; that the Apollo Prince was also mustering troops and restlessly moving cannon ; that the Czar, now at peace with the Turk, meditated foul play of what sort no man could say.

The Swedish Envoy, indeed, wrote from Dresden that King Augustus was all good wishes and peace ; had not the Czar a month or so ago sworn to be our friend and ally ? and the Elector of Brandenburg had refused his royal brother at Warsaw a passage for his soldiers. I hoped it was true. But I had looked into the bloodshot eyes of the would-be master of Dresden ; I had recoiled before the immortal hate of Patkul ; I had seen Saxon men marching through the streets of Dresden in the dead of night—and upstairs lay the packet to the Graf. Were I King Charles, I should have thanked them for their kind words and strengthened my bastions.

A brief lull ensued ; it was as if the frost had smitten the Chanceries of the North. Sweden and Denmark waited, no man could say why. “ Watchman, what of the night ? ” was the earnest cry ; the dawn must come ; would it be a dawn streaked with blood ?

The weeks slipped by ; my Lady did not return : in her stead came evil gossip. A sharp quarrel had occurred between the Fru Countess and my Lord Bengt. My Lord Karl, the servant said, and the Fröken Countess laboured for peace and all was well again, — no, for a cruel scene at Court followed. His Majesty had refused my Lord Karl’s petition to become a Trabant, had turned his back on him, and stalked in bleak silence from the room. I might well tremble. A King who turned his back on a noble would never give his approval to that noble’s marriage. It was ruin to the plans of the Fru Countess.

I inquired anxiously after my Lord Karl, only to be told with ominous smiles that he was leading a very gay life ; rumour after rumour leaked out that he was drifting, drifting, drifting into the whirlpools which had engulfed him at Dresden. I prayed God it was false. Alas ! the love of a noble woman alone could make and keep him what God had intended him to be, a gallant, chivalrous, high-spirited Polenstjerna. And the one woman who could do it had told

me, as plainly as the Countess Ebba could tell her tutor, that for her it was impossible. Ah ! yes, let my Lord Bengt keep my Lady's heart and he could watch his cousin with equanimity and bid defiance to his aunt. The stars in their courses fought for him, as they always seem to fight for the strong men who master their world because they have first mastered themselves.

Suddenly the whole family returned. The gossip had been false, vilely false. That was what I thankfully said as I stood in the hall to greet them. But after supper I confessed my cry of joy was wrong, and the next few days confirmed it. Something had happened at Stockholm, and that something affected myself. Courteous and polite they certainly were ; a Polenstjerna could not but be courteous and polite even to a worm to be bruised the next instant out of existence. This very courtesy bade me remember I had sunk back into the position which had been mine two years and more ago.

Ah ! if that had been all ! Two nights after my Lady's return I heard my Lord Karl stumble along the gallery, *brännvinn* in his voice. He struck my chamber door angrily with his fist as he lurched past ; I opened it with amazement, but he was already gone. Standing moody and irresolute on the threshold, I became aware that my Lord Bengt had stopped before me, candle in hand.

" You had better go to sleep, M. Martin," he said, coolly, " and forget what has happened to-night."

" It is nothing to me," I said, at last, for he remained coldly silent.

" I am not quite sure," he answered, slowly.

I stared at him.

" You see, you brought my cousin to Polenstjerna, and I do not think he forgets it." He snuffed the wick with his finger and thumb. " Like myself, M. Martin," he added, calmly, " you know too much."

I stared again.

My Lord smiled. "If you will permit me," he said, "to offer you some advice, I should say you will do well to leave Polenstjerna. You can neither help yourself nor anyone else by staying here."

It was vain to try to read what lay behind his pale, cold face.

"But whether you choose to stay or depart," he continued emphatically, "I must beg you to be absolutely silent on what you have heard to-night."

He left me to pace my room in a cruel anguish of spirit till my candles had burnt themselves out in their sockets.

The morrow of a sleepless night only increased my fears. I was alone in the castle—the family had departed in a sleigh, I had not been told whither—and as I moved restlessly along the galleries a whimper of tears startled me; the next minute I found Greta in her recess by my Lady's parlour, spinning-wheel upset, and herself in tears.

"Why are you crying?" I asked gently, whereupon Greta looked up with a stifled cry and hurriedly began wiping her eyes with her apron. "Why are you crying?" I repeated.

"I cannot tell you, sir," she said.

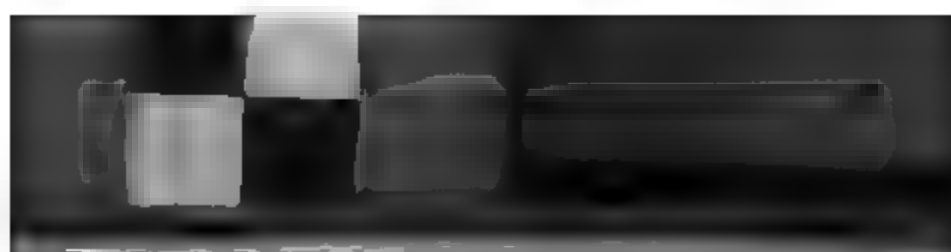
"But why not? I might help you."

It was a new idea. "My Lord Karl," she murmured between her sobs, "tried to kiss me last night, and—and—he did kiss me, and—he gave me that not to tell anyone, and the Herr Grefve Bengt gave me that, too, not to tell—and—and I am very unhappy." She flung two coins in a tearful pet on the floor.

"What have you been doing, you——"

"My Lord Karl said it was for the locket—and—be—because I was pretty. And I did not want to be kissed, and I hate the locket, and my Lord Bengt said I was a silly wench, and—and I am not a silly wench."

"You are," I said, fiercely, "a silly wench and a wicked one, too."



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This set her sobbing anew.

"Promise me," I implored, bewildered and angry, "promise me it shall not happen again."

"It was not my fault," she pleaded humbly. "I don't want to be kissed by anyone but father and perhaps—Axel sometimes. But what am I to do if the Herr Grefve tries again? what shall I do? Oh! *Herr Gott!* what shall I do?"

Poor child, poor child! Why is it we act as if it were only quality and birth that are led into temptation?

"It is all the White Countess," Greta sobbed. "I knew it, I knew it!"

"Oh! hold your tongue!" I burst out; it was bad enough without this idiotic folly to madden a desperate man.

"But it is so, it is so," she persisted. "I saw her lights last night, and Axel," her voice died away, "can't sleep because he saw her in the corridor. He did," she wailed. "And my Lord will try again, and will be wicked, and—and I am frightened. Oh! sir, can't you do something?" She sobbed more piteously than ever.

"Now be a sensible child," I said, as coaxingly as I could. "Listen. The next time go to your father, and then come and tell me and I will speak to the Fröken Grefviinna."

"I cannot tell father," she said, helplessly, "because of Axel, and he will marry Kristina and—and I hate her."

"Then you must help yourself," I retorted, angrily, "if you are such a ninny that——"

She started up. "I will tell father, I promise," she whimpered. "Do not be cross, sir."

"I am not cross," I answered, in a pet too. Happy King Charles, who would have nothing to do with women's humours!

Greta was about to say something, but sat down listlessly. "It is all the White Countess," she persisted in repeating, whereupon I marched off, chafing and miserable.

The White Countess forsooth! I kicked the panelling savagely. It was not the White Countess who made Greta's

eyes so bright, her cheeks so alluringly pink, and her figure so temptingly lissom ; it was not the White Countess who offered my Lord Karl *brännvinn*. The White Countess was not the Spirit of Evil from Dresden.

Stirred by a mysterious impulse I strode into the corridor which led to King Eric's Tower and stopped before the great door studded with its mighty nails and rusty bands. Bah ! How could the White Countess pass through that ? And I thrust out my hand to shake the ponderous lock and feel its strength, as I had so often done in the weeks of loneliness now gone. Merciful heaven ! the portal swung open noiselessly toward me ; a baby could have pulled it. A shiver ran through me. Surely I was bewitched. Alas ! no. There was the door open, and a blast of ghoulisic iciness from the darkness beyond chilled my breath. And now I was sobbing too, from sheer fear. Such a thing was absolutely astounding. Day and night was this door locked, else no servant would have shown his face after dark within a quarter of a mile of that ghostridden keep. That open door ! what did it, could it, mean ? I examined it carefully with chattering teeth. Ah ! the hinges and lock were oiled, and worked with a slimy silence. Human fingers had done this ; but whose and why ?

I pondered. Then with a shudder I slipped through and closed the door behind me. The cold in the *Salle des Pas Perdus* was numbing, and the bitter taint of dead men's bones sweeping over the stone flags stung my nostrils. I groped my way in the gloom to the door in the wall leading to the battlements, and I felt it all over. It was locked and bolted, and the grit and rust jarred on my frozen fingers. I had learned something, but I must, I must learn more, or, like Axel, I could not sleep in my bed. Summoning all my courage, I stole across the *Salle des Pas Perdus* and up the worn stairs, suddenly knocking my head against the door which admitted to the Tower, and sick with pain and terror I crouched on the steps, my heart thumping wildly. That



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door, too, should have been locked as fast as the other. I pushed at it fretfully; it swung away from me with the same eery, slimy silence. Yes, it was oiled too.

I must—I must go in; but I wrestled with myself for five minutes in an agony of cold and sweat before I could bring myself to try—and then I crept into the room. I could hear nothing but the rattle of my jaws and the elfish wail of the icy gusts from the mouldering graves, rising and falling above the dreary flapping of the tapestry. I drew my sword and listened. What if I should hear the thud of the hammers of the gnomes or—God! what was that? Only a rat! I stood and listened, my flesh creeping. The biting draught whistled in the blackened vaults of the roof and perished in the chimney; the rotten carpet and the moth-eaten hangings swayed like the arms of the legions of hell, but there was nothing. Slowly my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom and with a stifled cry I espied a half-burnt torch in the iron ring with tinder fastened to it. I lighted the torch and stared anew; there was nothing more,—yes, there was. Charred fragments of a fire lay on the hearth, a great heap. I handled them; they were just warm, at least they warmed my benumbed fingers. Someone had been here and that someone had lighted a fire, the someone who had oiled the doors. Who could it be who dared to light a fire in King Eric's Tower in the dead of night? But King Eric's Tower had no answer.

I was stark with cold, though my brain was ablaze. If I stayed longer I should be gibbering like an idiot. My foot kicked against something soft and I jumped with terror. This time it proved to be a glove, a sheepskin glove lined with silk, and by it were scattered a few pieces of paper. It was a woman's glove and—there were only two women at Polenstjerna who wore such gloves, the Fru Countess and my Lady. I prayed, I know not why, that it might not be either of these two; for why should they not have been here? It was their tower. Yes, it was those cursed oiled doors which made me sick to find a woman's glove in this

ghostly room to-day. Then I gathered up the paper and pored over the pieces till my eyes ached. They were torn so small that to read the writing was beyond me ; but unless I was strangely mistaken the character was most horribly like the writing of my Lord Bengt. I let them drop fluttering at my feet. Bengt and the Fru Countess in King Eric's Tower,—it was impossible ! But Bengt and my Lady ! Ah ! God ! it was too cruel.

Quaking with fear I stamped the torch out on the floor and left it where it lay, and then ran and ran, until I recollected it was madness to allow one of the maids to see me running along the corridor with a naked sword in my hand, as if I had seen the White Countess in broad daylight. Ugh ! how frightened and dizzy and miserable I was !

I went straight to the great hall, and thawed myself by the glorious fire with the cheerful winter sun shooting tongues of flame over the escutcheon of the Polenstjernas, "*Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !*" I rose and shook my fist at the White Countess. I could have roared, had I dared, for the very disquietness of my soul. And she, she,—the woman who was the cause of all this,—she in her framework of dust and gold gazed back at me incomparably serene and mysteriously beautiful. She, poor heart, had known what misery a beautiful woman could bring on herself and others. Had the dower of her loveliness only been inherited by her niece to-day that another Ebba Polenstjerna might learn with what suffering God in His inscrutable providence may chasten the most wonderful of all His gifts to the daughters of men ? Yes, I shook my fist at her.

"*Mon Dieu !* M. Martin, are you acting ?" the words were followed by a peal of the merriest laughter. My Lady was surveying me with her furs nestling against her cheeks kissed to a most virginal freshness by the keen air, and her cap set oh ! so saucily on her head. "What is the matter with the White Countess that you must be so rude ? Fie ! what has she done to you, poor lady ?"

It was good to hear that young innocent voice as free as in the days when on the Terrace I had pleaded for Mr. Locke, before the Graf came, and I was ignorant of Dresden.

My Lady walked up to the fire, shook the snow from her dress, and tossed off her gloves. "What is the matter?" she cried; "what is wrong with my hands that you stare at them like that? Do not the ladies of Dresden wear gloves?"

Oh! if her gloves had not been like that horrible glove in my pocket!

"At any rate," she laughed gaily, "my hands are clean, and yours, Monsieur Tutor——"

Pah! I had forgotten. They were still smutty with that accursed fire in King Eric's Tower. My Lady was looking at me soberly; raillery had given place to a dull anxiety. And I was speechless with shame and confusion.

"Are you ill?" she inquired, quickly; "you are so pale and——"

"Nothing, nothing," I stammered. "You—you frightened me, Countess, that is all."

I could not face her searching gaze. Hot with anger and fear, I asked permission to retire, and it was granted with a silent bow. A sharp stab of fear—was it fear?—had flashed across her face, and as I closed the door I saw her sit down wearily in a chair and stare at the fire as if some unworthy thought had suddenly attacked her.

"Does that glove belong to the Fröken Grefvinna?" I demanded fiercely of Greta.

The wench took the glove; she was all brightness and freshness to-day, confound her!

"No," she replied at once, "oh, no! I have never seen it before." She stared at me and I hid my hands behind my back.

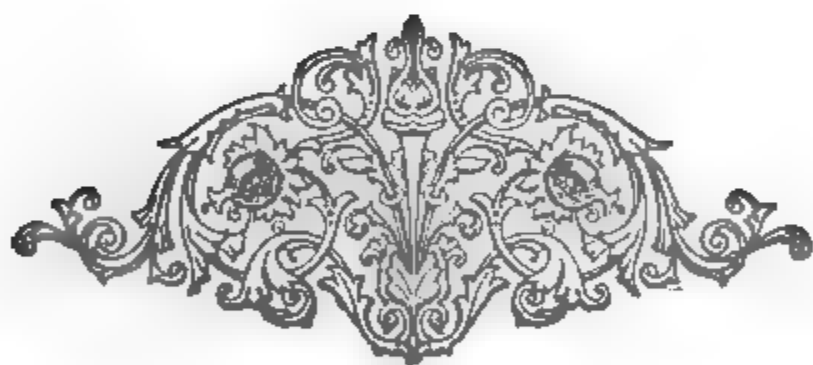
"Good!" I said, sharply, and began to stride away. Greta ran after me. "It is all right, sir," she prattled.

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"I have told father and—and Axel—and Axel says he will give the locket back to the Herr Grefve Karl and——"

I could not listen for the pæan of joy singing in my breast. I left Greta pouting. What were a wench's tears or laughter to me, who had been consumed by a terrible fear? I did not heed the soft titter nor the words, "I had something to tell you, sir." For I had looked into my Lady's eyes, eyes that could not lie, and I had read nothing of evil mysteries in their depths, and I was happy.

13





CHAPTER XV

THE GHOST OF KING ERIC'S TOWER

WITH my new resolve to depart steeling my heart, whom should I meet next morning but my Lady herself? She stopped at once. "Will you spare me five minutes, Herr Tutor?" she inquired, with a curtsy of mocking gravity.

I assented in silence, and she led me to her parlour. "I desire," she said, simply, "another favour at your hands. It is something very easy. To-night I visit King Eric's Tower and I want you to come with me."

"Countess!" She had clean taken my breath away.

"You would know the reason? Well, I find every maid, and man, for that matter, in the castle is scared out of their wits because," she laughed, "my aunt's woman and that love-sick goose, Axel, persist they have seen the White Countess in the corridor. So to-night I propose to see for myself."

I gazed at her helplessly.

"What! you are scared, too?" she began, astonished. "Why, long ago you told Greta it was all nonsense. Have you changed your mind, M. Martin?"

"No, no, but—" That infernal glove burned in my pocket.

"Greta is coming," she said, smiling, "though the wench's head is stuffed so full of idle stories that unless we have a man she will scream at anything and nothing,

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and I shall be made to look like a fool. Will you not help me ? ”

“ But,” I said, boldly, “ if it be true, what then ? ”

“ True, M. Martin ? You do not, cannot think it can be true ? ” She pushed the golden curls back as if she recollected yesterday and it frightened her. “ Tell me,” she asked, eagerly, “ you—you have not seen anything ? ”

“ No,” I answered, somewhat gruffly. “ No, what could I have seen ? ”

“ Because,” she murmured, “ if it were true, oh ! God help us ! ”

“ I would not go, Countess,” I urged weakly.

“ Why not ? ” she demanded, quickly. And I had no answer. “ No ; I mean to go, and if need be I will go alone.”

“ Will you not ask my Lord Bengt ? ” I suggested, in despair at her obstinacy.

“ He has gone to Stockholm. And besides I—I would not go with my cousin Bengt.”

I glanced at her in a hasty fear. It was only a woman's reason. With her lover, no ; but with M. Martin, the tutor, yes. Thank God ! that was all.

“ My Lord Karl——” I stammered.

Her head went up. “ No,” she answered with haughty decision, “ I will not ask my cousin Karl. I see what you are too polite to say—that this whim is the mad freak of a silly girl. Be it so. *Mon Dieu !* I cannot always be a Grefvinna Polenstjerna, and I shall soon be old. Let me be a silly girl once, just once more, and a silly girl who must be humoured sometimes. I am sure, if one of the fine young ladies at Dresden had asked you, you would not have pulled a long face and poured out your ‘buts.’ Come, Monsieur Tutor, be silly too, just once—to please me, your pupil.”

My resolve was melting away like snow in the sun. “ It is,” I said, gravely, “ of the Grefvinna Polenstjerna, not of my pupil, that I am thinking.”

My meaning flashed into her eyes. “ I must command



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you," she said, with an adorable flush of pride ; " yes, I command you, and I am mistress here. I shall do and I will do what I please."

Face and form stiffened into the demurest and most enchanting primness.

" Yes," I said, hardly daring to meet her pleadingly arch eyes, " I will come."

Lord ! what fools men can be when a woman inspires the folly ! I am glad the Princess Rapierska was not in that parlour to point her moral.

" Bravo !" my Lady cried, clapping her hands, and she gave me her fingers to kiss.

" Countess, I, too, have something to ask—" I began, timidly.

" Hush !" she interrupted, " not a word. To-morrow you shall scold and ask what you will, but to-day, no."

And double fool that I was, I held my tongue from sheer joy at finding my pupil could be the gracious mistress whom I had taught in the days before packets came to Polenstjerna.

And so it was speedily arranged that at half-past eleven I was to be in the corridor leading to King Eric's Tower. " You must be very brave," were my Lady's final commands, " because I shall be quaking with fear. We shall not see anything. The White Countess only shows herself when evil is afoot and," she flung her arms open and laughed joyously, " there is no evil in Polenstjerna, for to-morrow,"—she stopped with the blood crimsoning her radiant face,— " to-morrow I shall be Fröken Grefviuna Polenstjerna."

The light dawned on me. Bengt must have journeyed to Stockholm to crave the King's consent, and to-morrow night would bring a happy lover back to his happy mistress.

The hours crawled by on leaden feet. Long before eleven I buckled on my sword, wrapped my furs about me, and sallied forth. A heavy hush lapped the castle. Groping my way, I crept to the outer hall, starting at every creak

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of the stairs or of the ancient furniture. Except for the solemn ticking of the old clock, feebly beating time to the weary march of night, the eery stillness reminded me of nothing so much as the mystery-ridden "Trumpeter of the Taschenberg." I was alone in the outer hall, and yet I was not alone. The darkness seemed to be full of unearthly presences, to vibrate with the ghostly and immortal souls of the men and women whose loves and laughter, joys and sorrows, hatreds and rivalries and deeds of high achievement, had made the past, and, all unseen and unseeable, were making the present. The air was thick, as with the mist of another world—the spirits of the dead Polenstjernas quivered through it, communing with mine. Strangest of all, it did not frighten me; nay, it was a comfort. Nothing is so absolutely terrifying as complete and utter loneliness in the dark. And assuredly I was not alone to-night.

The clock wheezed out the half-hour. The cry of the watchmen on the battlements going their rounds droned sleepily. I listened eagerly—ten minutes, fifteen, crawled by—a rustle—a hooded figure was stealing towards me.

"*Mon Dieu!*" said a scared voice, "is that you, M. Martin? I am late; I could not persuade Greta to come; the minx flatly refused. We must go by ourselves."

I had not bargained for this. "We had better turn back," I whispered, earnestly.

"Tell me, are you afraid?"

"No, I do not fear any ghost," and I very nearly added, "with you."

"I am so glad. There is no fear in your voice. It is something to be a man. I am shivering with fright."

"Then let us go back."

"Never! You would laugh at me, and I mean to show you that a woman in her fear can be as brave as any man in his courage. Give me your hand, M. Martin."

Even through the glove I could feel the tremble of her

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fingers. "Are you quite sure," she demanded, slowly, "that no one is about?"

"Do you hear anyone, Countess?" I asked, alarmed.

"No, not exactly hear, but," she pushed the hood of her cloak from her face, "the air seems thick, as if someone was breathing here, there, everywhere. Are you really quite sure we are alone?"

"Yes, quite sure."

"What a coward I am! Here is the key of the door, and now forward! We need all our time, as the locks are stiff. Ah! what is the matter?"

"Nothing." In my joy at discovering she knew nothing of those oiled hinges, I had involuntarily clasped her hand tighter.

"Is it the wrong key?" she asked, anxiously, as I fumbled with the great door.

"No." I guided her hand to the lock. "Pull, Madam," I said, gently, "pull towards you, please."

She obeyed; the hideous portal swung noiselessly open with a gruesome ease.

"It is already unlocked," she exclaimed with a sob. "*Mon Dieu!* what is the meaning of this?" The quick flutter of her bosom stirred the air as we peered in silence into the icy blackness beyond, and the wind swept the taint of dead men's bones in our faces.

"We *must* go on," she said, after a long pause. "Is it possible that—*Herr Jesus!*" she cried, wrenching my arm violently.

I jumped too and swore, not very badly, I hope, for out of the gusty darkness had darted a red circling flash of light, showing to our terror-stricken eyes that the door above the steps leading into the chamber of the White Countess was wide open. Then all was blackness again.

"Are you afraid now?" she asked, and her voice was wonderfully steady.

"Where you go, Countess, I go," I replied, setting my

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teeth. In good truth, I was trembling with fear, but I would have died rather than admit it. Nevertheless I prayed my Lady would turn back.

“Forward, in God’s name!” she muttered, unblenchingly. Seizing my hand she advanced over the broken flags. Ah! merciful heaven! another circling flash, and another! cutting through the pitchy gloom with a hellish radiance; my blood curdled; my hair rose under my wig; and had not my Lady held my hand I had run. She stumbled unceasingly forward, but even her wondrous courage forsook her. She stopped with a gasping cry. The most terrible thing had happened.

In the doorway at the top of the stairs had appeared a tall woman’s figure, unearthly tall and great, a woman dressed in flowing white, with a heavy white veil thrown over her face, and in one hand blazed a monstrous torch which she slowly waved over and round her head.

“*Herr Jesus!*” wailed my Lady. The infernal glare revealed her cheeks as pale as death, and God knows what colour mine were. I was shaking like a palsied man. We stood spellbound. The ghostly woman circled the torch till it became an unbroken halo of fire, and next minute slowly, very slowly, she descended the stairs with left arm outstretched in a cruel menace, while the blazing torch wheeled above her veiled head. It was more than flesh and blood could endure.

“My God! it is the White Countess!” burst from my Lady’s lips. “We must run,” she sobbed. “Run, M. Martin, and God help us or we shall be too late!”

Run we did. Over the broken flags, and through the doorway and down the corridor we flew; and I only recovered my senses leaning against the clock in the outer hall with my Lady in a dead faint at my feet.

I carried her swiftly into the great hall and howled for Greta and aid, and as I kneeled at her side with the dying embers of the fire turning her blanched and pain-drawn face

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to grey, bereft of my wits, and sobbing, I babbled of all that had been in my heart for two years.

Help came at last, but it was not Greta ; it was my Lord Karl, candlestick in one hand, naked sword in the other, his sleepy eyes hot with anger at what he saw.

"What are you doing here?" he growled out with a peevish oath.

"The Fröken Grefvinna saw the White Countess," I stammered, "and——"

"Damnation!" came from between his teeth.

"For God's sake, Herr Grefve, get help, and I will explain."

"You shall, upon my word." He thrust his sword viciously into the scabbard and bawled peremptorily with an oath or two, till the castle rang and Axel came bounding on the scene brandishing a long knife. Before long the scared faces of half-dressed women were peeping over the staircase; when they saw us, and Axel with a torch, they fluttered down like a flock of pigeons.

"Wait here," Karl muttered to myself. "Out of the way, wenches!" and he lifted my Lady and swiftly mounted the stairs with the women at his heels.

Amidst all the flurry and bustle it had struck me as amazing that of the women who had thronged the hall Greta alone was not amongst them. And yet Greta alone knew what her mistress had intended to do. That and the oiled doors meant a mystery of which I must know more.

In a few minutes my Lord Karl came slowly down the stairs and halted in front of me. "To-morrow, sir," he said, with a cold and splendid pride, "you shall explain all or give me the satisfaction that one gentleman can give another. I wish you good night." He bowed again and strode away.

So this was the end of "a silly girl's folly." Poor Karl! was he aware that to-morrow he would reckon not with me, but with my Lord Bengt and my Lady? But Greta! why

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had she—I drew my breath with a stab of pain. In the darkness a woman, I could swear, had glided past me down the corridor towards that oiled door. Yes, yonder she was stealing. Fear vanished in a trice. White Countess or no White Countess, I would know what that woman's errand was; and rapid as thought I was after the clicking scurry of her feet. She had flung the great door open; it caught me in the face; I dashed it back with an oath; in front the patter of her heels and the swish of her dress echoed on the stone flags. I stumbled; a tiny scream told me my pursuit was betrayed. I flew. There were no circling lights this time. The woman bounded up the worn steps, but she was in petticoats and on the top stone she tripped. "*Herr Jesus!*" she howled, as I grabbed her by the arm. Merciful heaven! It was Greta! My guess had been correct! And now——

My mouth was choked by two demoniac hands clutching my throat; they pinned me as if in a vise against the wall, and a hoarse voice hissed into my ear in German: "Who the devil are you? Speak quick, or, by God! I'll put my dagger into your side."

"Martin, Martin," I just gurgled out. Greta gave another gasping sob; but the iron fingers on my throat dropped as amazingly as they had throttled me.

"*Potztausend!* Martin! *Allmächtiger Gott!*"

I reeled backwards. The Graf! it was the Graf! I should have fallen head over heels had not those terrible hands saved me.

"*Du lieber Jesus!*" he muttered. "Another second and I had ripped you open, my bookworm. Greta, you jade, the lantern, *raska, genast!* Martin," he muttered, laughing, "Martin, by all the saints! What in Satan's name are you doing here?"

"And what, Herr Graf," I repeated, feebly, "are *you* doing here?"

He burst into loud laughter. Greta, still whimpering,

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returned with the lantern, and by its light I tottered into the chamber of the White Countess.

"Drink it up," the Graf commanded, thrusting a glass under my nose. "It's devilish cold in that infernal passage, and it will take away the feel of my fingers on your gullet."

I drank greedily and sank into a chair, sick and faint. The glare of the torches and the fire made a rainbow of elfish red, blue, and green in a smoky mist before my eyes.

"*Noch ein*," he said, cheerfully. "God knows it makes the stomach queasy to have a dagger within an inch of your bowels."

That, too, I swallowed at a gulp. The elfish lights slowly danced themselves into thin air. I sat up; I was no longer in the power of the gnomes and their devilries; I could see the torches flaming fitfully, the fire, the portrait of the White Countess, and the Graf at my elbow eyeing me with comical anxiety.

"Good!" he cried, with a gay slap on my back. Then he turned to Greta, crouching by the rotten tapestry in the mutest and most abject terror.

"Look here, my wench," he began, taking her by the chin, "if you tell a mortal soul that you found M. Martin here I'll have you whipped from one end of the hamlet to the other, and the parson will make you stand in your shift in the church for a week till you have burned a score of candles." Greta commenced to cry outright. He let go her chin and gave her cheek a coaxing pat. "But if you hold your tongue like a good wench, see! you shall have that," he dangled a gold chain on her bodice, "to make the other girls mad with envy. Now take yourself off and have a care no one sees you." Greta stared. "Quick! do you hear? be off!"

She dropped a tearful curtsey and vanished. Slowly the click of her slippers died away on the cold stones.

I stared about me. The sullen secrets of "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg" were nothing to this amazing scene.

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Could it really be that I was in King Eric's Tower? The grim chamber was quite transformed. A couple of cloaks were nailed over the narrow lancet windows to keep out the wind and the light; papers were strewn over the table, on which stood also a flagon of wine, a chine of beef, a pair of long pipes, a drawn sword, and a pistol primed and cocked. At the threshold of the inner room had been carelessly thrown a woman's long white robe and hood, and over all roamed the mournful, mysterious eyes of the White Countess.

Ha! The ghost, I cried to myself, was no ghost at all, but a woman of flesh and blood, perhaps now concealed in the tower with the Graf. I was bewildered, but I would not leave this chamber till my mind was as clear as day.

The Graf watched me in chuckling enjoyment of my indignant perplexity. "The very man," he said, coolly, "whom I most desired to see. And I could not imagine how the devil I was to compass it."

"They told me that you had left Sweden months ago," I said sullenly.

"They told you that, did they? It is curious they told me the same of you, and I only learned yesterday it was a lie. But did not Greta give you my message?"

"Message?" I faltered, recollecting with shame her strange words the day before, to which in my stupid joy I had refused to listen. I explained hastily.

"*Herr Gott!* and you have been back these two months at least!" the Graf groaned.

"Yes," I said, groaning too. What luck! the packet was in my pocket. I lugged it out gleefully. But he did not wait for my eager words. Snatching the packet with the snarl of a hungry dog, he tore the cover off.

As I had guessed, the contents were in cipher, which the Graf interpreted with ease, puckering his brows and swearing softly as he rapidly spelled his way. Save that he once hit the table with his hand he worked in a horrible silence, and when he had finished, he pushed the papers away

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angrily, drank a glass of wine, and sat for fully five minutes passing his hands through his hair.

"A bad business," he muttered savagely, "a damnably bad business! I ought to have had that packet months ago."

"What! you don't mean to say you have been in the Tower all this time? You were not here yesterday morning."

"How do you know that?" he demanded, sharply.

I explained shortly and he whistled thoughtfully. "So it was you," he said, "who played with my torch and left your footmarks in the ashes of the fire? I thought it was—" he stopped, "well,—someone else. No, I only came yesterday. I wish to God I had been here these last two months." His fingers drummed feverishly. Never could I have imagined he would be so upset by anything.

"I have something more for you," I said, "a letter from Fräulein Kätchen."

"Fräulein Kätchen?" An irrepressible twinkle stole into his eyes and he winked as he took it. "Now, *mon ami*, I shall hear something of you, eh?"

It was a long letter and he commenced with a wicked smile to read it as if it were a *billet-doux*. Hardly had I closed my weary eyes when I was sharply aroused by a blood-curdling string of oaths, Polish, German, and French. Fräulein Kätchen's letter had dropped on the floor. "Is this true?" the Graf demanded.

"But, my dear Graf, I do not know what is in the letter."

"This—this about the Princess Rapierska?"

That! Kätchen had told him that!

"Yes. It is true, I swear it," and I related the whole story, not forgetting the man who had lain face upwards in the courtyard.

For answer he smote the table with his fist till the glasses rang. "May the devil rot him!" he hissed out. But whether he referred to the King or his Excellency or both I *did not* care to inquire. And then, as if ashamed of his

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violence, he betook himself to the letter again, and finished his study of it with dry, moving, but speechless lips. In a storm of passion he suddenly tore it into pieces and hurled them on the fire. His eyes were the eyes of some fierce bear or lion trapped and mauled, but still most cruelly dangerous. God help the man who came within reach of his bloody paw!

"So!" he growled. "That's it, is it? Well, we will see. We'll see, curse 'em!"

I sprang to his side. "Dear Graf," I pleaded, "tell me, for heaven's sake."

"No," he snapped back, "I won't and can't tell you." His hand went roaming through his hair. Presently he laughed, a long, revengeful laugh which made one's flesh creep to hear.

"You have done me a service," he said, earnestly, holding out a hand. "I cannot tell you now, but on my honour as a gentleman you shall know the truth in three weeks."

"Fräulein Kätchen could tell you I can keep a secret," I protested reproachfully.

"I don't want Fräulein Kätchen to be sure of that. But it is not my secret, and all that I can say at present is that the King's business is ended—done with; mine is beginning." He put his finger on his nose and winked gently, but no wink could have concealed the relentless ferocity which rasped in his voice, the bloodthirsty despair of a man with his back to the wall, half a dozen foes pressing him hard, and the man himself fighting, not for life, but to kill as many as he could before he dropped.

"No more questions," he said, sharply. "Understand, please, I won't answer them."

"One thing I must know," I said, passionately; "is the White Countess in there?" I pointed at the inner chamber.

"She has been," he laughed. "It is no woman you have ever seen at Polenstjerna. Now go to bed. If they found you here I could not answer for the consequences."

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“ I won't go till you answer this, too. What is that infernal ‘ Trumpeter of the Taschenberg ’ to which you sent me ? ”

“ I will. ‘ The Trumpeter ’ is a hostelry kept up by his Majesty and some of his Ministers to accommodate bookworms when they visit Dresden,”—I shook him angrily,—“ a hostelry,” he continued, “ kept also for various other purposes of their own, private and public, and Fräulein Kätchen looks after both. You take me, I think ? ”

I did. The answer confirmed only too unpleasantly the suspicions which Dresden had bred in my mind.

“ Now off with you ! ” he cried, and he dragged me towards the door.

“ Greta ! ” I protested ; “ Graf, tell me you don't mean any harm to Greta.”

He dropped my arm and surveyed my face. “ And if I did ? ” he questioned.

“ Then I will go straight to the Fröken Grefvinna. You shan't, you shan't do it.”

“ No,” he hastened to assure me, for I had frightened him ; “ Greta will never burn any candles for me, on my word of honour.”

“ Thank you,” I answered, and I was quite ready to go to bed.

At the top of the stairs he put his hand on my shoulder. “ Remember,” he whispered, “ if you get into trouble——”

“ Trouble ! ” I gasped. “ Trouble, Graf ? ”

“ Yes, trouble,” he repeated, with a grim kindness. “ Do not forget you have a grateful friend in the Graf von Waldschlösschen. Good-bye, my bookworm. You have my sincere thanks for all you have done. Adieu ! ”

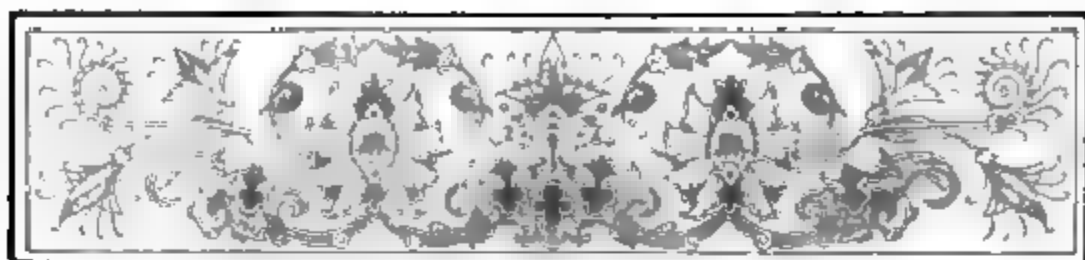
Our hands met. Something like a tear stood in his eye, and mine were moist too. Beyond us lay the darkness, lightness itself when I thought of the future. With good reason the air was still thick, and now I knew why, with the spirits and presence of the Polenstjernas.

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I crawled like a beaten hound across the tainted *Salle des Pas Perdus* to bed, and, once safe in my chamber, thanked God on my knees for His goodness.

To-morrow, ah! to-morrow,—no, to-day, to-day, I murmured as I dropped to sleep, to-day my Lord Bengt returns and I shall make myself free.





CHAPTER XVI

THE WORD OF A COUNTESS

GRETA did not surprise me next morning when she informed me that the Fröken Grefvinna begged me to wait on her forthwith. In vain I sought in the wench's bright eyes and rosy cheeks for traces of the grim mysteries of last night. Terror no more had dominion over her, now that she knew that the dreaded apparition was a woman of flesh and blood like herself. How different was I! If it had only been a ghost, not a real man or woman! Ghosts I did not fear; but a White Countess behind whose robes lurked my Lord Bengt and the Fru Countess, his Excellency, and a Graf with bloodthirsty revenge in his voice, cowed me into abject surrender.

Wonders would never cease. My Lady was still a trifle pale, but bubbling over with high spirits. "I never felt better," she answered to my timid inquiries. "Upon my word, fainting must do a woman good, though I made a sad ado over it. You must forgive me that, and confess you were quite as frightened as I was."

"Indeed I was," I admitted, gladly.

Her laugh convinced me she had already seen my Lord Bengt. "You have not, I hope, spoken to anyone of—of what we saw?" she asked, after an awkward pause.

"I have no one to tell, Madam."

"Because," she pursued, eagerly, "we must not breathe so much as a word about it. If my women heard of it, not

a wench of them would stay at Polenstjerna. We have had our children's escapade, and to-day we are grown up. I promised you I would never be foolish again. I never will. So I ask you to keep silence and forget it all—all."

They were not her own words; my Lord Bengt was speaking to me, and I had been sent for to be bound over to hold my tongue. But what had my Lord Bengt told her?

"Do you think, Countess," I inquired at a venture, "that what we saw was real?"

"Real?" she regarded me anxiously. "What do you mean?"

"Was it the White Countess?" I said, boldly.

"I do not know. But my cousin Bengt"—ah! I was right—"is sure that someone in the castle played a trick on us. He will inquire, so for the present I beg you to be silent."

I pondered on this answer. One look at her fresh young face was enough to convince me she had no suspicion of the real state of affairs.

"Why," she laughed, "I do believe you are still quaking. Your cheeks are pale, your eyes heavy. Come, Monsieur Tutor, forget all my foolishness; before long we shall discover the rascal who dared play such a scurvy trick."

"I would willingly forget, but——"

"Those terrible 'buts'," she murmured, fretfully.

"—but for my Lord Karl," I added, gravely.

"Karl?" she interrupted, sharply, and listened eagerly while I related that part of my story. "Is that all?" she cried with a merry laugh, "and so my cousin Karl found you acting as my nurse and tutor in one. *Mon Dieu!* it must have been a rare sight. And he helped you? Bravo! My cousin Karl has more skill, I'll be bound, than M. Martin in dealing with fainting and foolish women."

Nothing could quench her spirits this morning. "There, now!" she added, briskly, "you need not look so glum. Karl shall have his explanation, I promise you; and if he still insists on fighting, he shall fight me."

"And supposing my Lord Bengt also demands an explanation?"

"Then," she replied, with a toss of her head, "he shall not have it. We have had enough fuss over nothing as it is. I beg you to be cheerful."

"Countess," I said, after an awkward pause, "I ask to be released from my promise to stay at Polenstjerna."

The gaiety died away. Little throbs of fear stole into her eyes. "Is it," she inquired, timidly, "because of—of—because of last night?"

"Partly."

"But I do assure you, you need not be frightened. Really I had not expected to find my tutor afraid of the White Countess."

"I am not afraid of the White Countess."

"What, then, can it be? Do you wish to say," she asked, with a teasing smile, "that it is the living Countess Ebba who drives you away?"

"Yes," I said, "that is what I wish to say." I had said it at last.

"What have I done," broke in the gentle question, "to deserve that harsh speech? I have tried to be your friend honestly, and I would remain your friend."

"I am sorry I spoke," I said, hastily. "Countess, give me your permission to leave Polenstjerna and I will ask your pardon."

"No," she replied, with a sudden pride, "you shall not go until you have told me what I have done. If I have offended you, it is I who will ask pardon. If last night I behaved as no woman and a Polenstjerna should, I am heartily sorry for my folly. Rebuke me, scold me if you will, but when you tell me it is I,—I who am grateful for your services, I who would be your friend,—that it is I who am driving you away, I must and will know the reason."

"I desire to leave Polenstjerna," I answered, "not because I would, but because I must."

“Must? when I ask you to stay?”

“Yes,” I said, doggedly, “must, because you ask me to stay. If I stay I shall lose my self-respect. Ah! Countess, cannot you understand that here at Polenstjerna you have taught me to love you?”

“Oh!” It was as if a serpent had stung her, and she stared helplessly about the room.

“It is the truth,” I muttered.

“Don’t! Don’t! How dare you?” Her eyes were flashing now at the insult.

“You forced me to tell you,” I said, “and before God it is the truth.”

“Hush! Hush! You must never say that again, never! I may not, must not, listen. Yes, yes, you must go and forget.” She was both angry and agitated.

“I will go,” I said, “but forget I cannot and will not.”

“You are mad, M. Martin, go, I beseech you, before—oh! you cannot love me, it is impossible! This idle fancy will pass.” Her words poured out at random.

“Impossible! impossible!” I repeated, bitterly. Yes, I suppose it ought to have been impossible that the yeoman born could have a heart such as God had given to the noble. “It is no fancy, Countess. I have wrestled with it for two years, and now it is time for me to go.”

“Yes,” my Lady answered, with quiet dignity, “it is time for you to go.”

“Will you not send me away with a kinder word than that?” I pleaded.

“Surely,” she replied; “I am willing to forget what you have said, and presently you will forget too. Let us part as friends, M. Martin.”

“Friends!” It was more than I could endure to be treated as if I could not be in earnest. “Friends, Madam, we can hardly be. A man cannot be friends with the woman whom he loves, even though he has no right to love her.” I did not heed her despairing gesture. “But I pray God

that some day He will grant me to show that M. Martin is not your friend, but your servant unto death."

"Leave me," she interrupted, "I beseech you. Good-bye!" and then her woman's tenderness beat down in a flash the bars of her pride. "Good-bye! I am sorry for you, very sorry; may God help you to forget."

I seized her trembling fingers and on my knees pressed them passionately to my lips. The light was passing out of my life.

The door opened and on the threshold stood my Lords Bengt and Karl, indignation and astonishment in their faces. My Lady snatched back her hand, flushing an angry scarlet, while I stumbled to my feet in the most wretched confusion.

"Ah!" Karl exclaimed, hotly. His face, too, was flushed, in marked contrast to the calm, almost amused glance of my Lord Bengt. "So!" he cried. "This is what I find: M. Martin on his knees to the Grefvinna Polenstjerna! It is insufferable!"

Bengt put a soothing hand on his arm. "M. Martin," he said, suavely, "will no doubt explain anything which requires explanation."

My Lady swept me to one side. "M. Martin," she said, "has nothing to explain, but I have, Karl," and she proceeded with great dignity to tell the whole story of our visit to King Eric's Tower. "Karl," she wound up, "do not be foolish. M. Martin leaves Polenstjerna to-day. Now that you know the truth you will, I am sure, offer him an apology."

"An apology, Ebba, an apology! Never!"

"But, Karl, remember what we all owe to M. Martin."

"I thought," my Lord answered, with head high in air, "I thought once I owed much to M. Martin, and I was grateful. To-day I am wiser, and I am here to demand and receive, as I informed him last night, an explanation."

"For what, Herr Grefve?" I asked, quickly.

Bengt had whispered in his ear, but was petulantly thrust

away. "I have three questions," he said, stiffly, "and if M. Martin can answer them to the satisfaction of those present, I will apologise ; but if not—then——"

Again Bengt whispered earnestly, and again he was shaken off.

"And first," Karl began, fiercely, "I would know how it is that after last night M. Martin, the tutor, is discovered this morning in this room, at the knees of my cousin, the Grefvinna Polenstjerna."

An angry spot of red darted into my Lady's cheek. "M. Martin," she said, peremptorily, "you will not answer that question."

"Why not?" Karl demanded.

"Because what I permit M. Martin to do, or do myself is my affair and my affair alone."

"It may also be the affair of others," Karl was foolish enough to reply. "You forget, Ebba, what my uncle, your——"

"Bengt," interrupted my Lady with superb iciness, "you will excuse me. Cousin, I am your humble servant. M. Martin, your hand, I beg." She curtsied low, and walked towards the door. But Karl suddenly closed it in her face. "Very good," he answered, sulkily, "we will let that pass." Then he turned to me, triumphantly. "M. Martin," he said, slowly, "on your honour did you or did you not visit King Eric's Tower after,"—he paused,—"*after* the Fröken Grefvinna was taken to her room?"

It was a veritable thunderbolt. My Lady dropped my arm in piteous astonishment.

"That is a very simple question," Bengt remarked in the horrible stillness.

I looked round ; the clock on the mantel-shelf chimed out some hour or half-hour.

"I decline to answer it," I said, at last.

Bengt made a gesture of despairing deprecation. My Lady put her hand to her eyes as if she would wipe away a

mist that was creeping down. "You decline to answer it?" she repeated, faintly.

The sweat oozed out on my brow. A surge as of the winter sea roared in my ears. "Yes," I said, and my voice rang hollow, "I decline to answer it."

"Exactly," Karl pronounced, dryly, and he swept a victorious glance at Bengt.

"Will you also," he pursued, "decline to answer this? On your honour, sir, was it not at the request, the bidding of the Graf von Flemming that you returned to Polenstjerna?"

The room swam round me. Who, who was the traitor? The Graf? Greta? The Princess Rapierska? Myself?

"The Graf von Flemming!" my Lady had exclaimed, with a sharp cry of pain.

"That was what Karl said," Bengt observed, in his passionless voice. "M. Martin, we await your answer." He surveyed me with eyes diabolically imperturbable, the only calm eyes in the room.

"I decline," I repeated in despair, "to answer the question."

"Precisely so," Karl retorted, grimly. "A spy in the pay of the Graf von Flemming naturally would decline——"

"A spy!" My Lady had risen. "Karl, I beg you——"

"Yes, a spy," he repeated.

"M. Martin," she implored, "for God's sake! answer the question, and tell the truth."

"Countess," I said, after piteous reflection, "I recognise your right to know the truth. It *was* at the request of the Graf von Flemming, as well as at the request of the Herr Grefve, your cousin, that I returned; and I brought a letter from his Excellency to the Fru Countess in answer to a packet which I had carried by her wish to Dresden. That is my answer."

It fell like a bursting bomb. My Lady gasped; even Bengt gripped the chair beside him in a paroxysm of surprise.

“ You infernal liar ! ” Karl exclaimed, and he would have struck me had not Bengt seized his arm.

“ I am no liar ! ” I said, hotly. “ What I said is the truth. ”

“ In short, sir, ” Karl remarked, “ you have the impudence to insinuate that it was with my mother’s connivance that you returned as a spy ? ”

“ Insinuate ! A spy ! ” I repeated, bewildered. “ I do not understand. I did what I was told ; was there anything wrong in that ? ”

The reply puzzled the two not a little. Some earnest whispering followed.

“ You would mean, ” Bengt interposed, “ that the Fru Countess desired you to keep both packet and letter a secret ? ”

“ Yes, ” I said, quickly, “ and that is why I declined to answer. ”

“ It is monstrous ! ” Karl said, vehemently ; but the ray of hope in my Lady’s blanched face made me feel quite happy.

Bengt stood pondering for fully two minutes. “ We are at a deadlock, ” he remarked in his courteous tones. “ You have no objection, I presume, M. Martin, to my fetching the Fru Countess ? ”

“ I should desire it of all things, Herr Grefve. ”

An eternity of ten cruel minutes and then Madam glided past me, magnificent as usual in her lace and black velvet. Her proud Polish eyes surveyed my Lady, above all, with icy pity, while my Lord explained.

“ M. Martin, ” she answered, promptly, pronouncing her words with a horrible clearness, “ must be suffering from a strange delusion. I gave him no packet, Ebba ; he brought me no letter. I cannot understand why he should make these statements. ”

It was another bursting bomb. The lie had been uttered with a glib assurance and a simple pride which carried a crushing conviction to the ear.

And now I was quite calm, noticing the triumph shoot into Karl's eyes, the searching look which Bengt directed first at his aunt and then at myself. I saw my Lady step back, her hands to her face; I heard her sob. I was ruined, and my one friend in the world was a prisoner in King Eric's Tower.

"If there was a packet," Bengt had the audacity to say, "you, M. Martin, would know what was in it."

"Bengt," Madam interrupted, fiercely, "there was no packet. Do you dare to doubt my word?"

Her nephew shook his head coolly, bowed, and fell back smiling. Galled by his passionless calm, Madam turned on me.

"I am disappointed in you," she said, with a withering look, "bitterly disappointed. It was an evil day on which you, M. Martin, came to Polenstjerna."

"It was, indeed, Fru Grefvinna," I answered, and I compelled her to drop her eyes.

My Lady came between us. "Take back your words, M. Martin," she implored, with a wonderfully sweet dignity. "I ask it as your pupil and your friend."

"It is impossible, Madam," I said, gently. "As I have been your teacher and you my pupil I have told the truth."

"Do not persist," she pleaded. "Do not, ah! do not make yourself a liar!"

With her I could not bandy words. I bowed my head and was silent.

"What! You do persist? Ah!" she covered her face; "M. Martin, you disappoint me, bitterly disappoint me." She walked away slowly and sat down. She was crying.

"Well, sir," Karl interrupted, harshly, "what have you to say now?"

"I have nothing to say."

"You shall apologise," he said. "First, for the false statements you have made of my mother, secondly, for grossly abusing your position as tutor——"

My Lady had risen in a moment and flung the suggestion back. "I do not want M. Martin's apology," she said, coldly, "nor will he dare to offer me one."

"And," I said, in dogged wrath, "I—I will not apologise to the Fru Countess."

"Then," said Karl, furiously, "we must consider how we are to deal with a liar and a spy."

But here, to my intense astonishment, Bengt interposed. "Let us be fair," he protested, in his suavest tones. "If M. Martin took no packet and brought no letter, as we are bound to believe, it is still to be proved that he is in the service of the Graf von Flemming."

It was done with a most charming finish ; and with a wild throb I felt that even now I might save myself if I would consent to reveal the Graf's share in my visit to Dresden. The Fru Countess was watching me narrowly ; had they only had eyes to see they could have read her guilt ; but because I was yeoman born and she was noble they were blind.

"I thank you, Herr Grefve," I said, gratefully, after pondering earnestly, "but you may spare yourself the trouble of defending me. I repeat that I returned at the request of the Graf von Flemming."

"What more do we want?" Karl demanded. He and his mother had been conversing apart. The poor fool, I perceived, was a mere tool in her hands, as I had been ; she had cozened him with lies as she had cozened me.

Bengt smiled. "Perhaps M. Martin," he said, with the most studious politeness, "will now answer the question about King Eric's Tower."

I paused. My Lady looked up, and awaited my answer as breathlessly as the others.

"Yes," I said, deliberately, "I can answer that now. In the last two days I have twice been in King Eric's Tower, and," I looked them all full in the face, "I was there last night after the Fröken Grefvinna fainted."

My Lady rose, fear, a nameless fear, blanching her to the

lips, and then sank into her chair. The Fru Countess and Karl were equally terrified. Even Bengt was appalled. But my enjoyment, alas! of their confusion was short-lived.

"Really, sir," Bengt observed, gravely, "after that admission it is impossible to say anything for one who destroys his own character with such shameless levity."

It was an amazing answer; but I understood it very quickly. The truth, for reasons best known to themselves, was the last thing they desired to have told in the presence of my pupil.

"Why did you do it?" my Lady had asked, in the simple passion of her innocent ignorance.

Could I betray the Graf? Before I could decide, the Fru Countess had struck in.

"Ebba," she said, coldly, "surely for M. Martin's sake, the sooner we close this painful scene the better."

It was a master stroke. Dresden was not alone to teach me how infinitely guileful a woman can be who has the brains and the ambition of a man.

My Lady bowed her head wearily. At every step she had only seen me sink deeper in the mire: it was indeed time to stop.

Bengt was endeavouring to moderate his cousin's vehemence, to pluck from his mouth the fiercely muttered words, "liar" and "spy," which he had once more hurled at me.

"We do not want a scandal," he said aloud; "M. Martin has eaten our bread and been in our service. He has done his duty, as we all know; if he has in the end fallen a victim to temptation—" he paused, and invited me with a look to speak; but I shook my head in angry scorn at their mercy and their favours.

"Certainly," the Fru Countess added with a magnificent air of forgiveness, "I do not desire to be harsh. I suggest that M. Martin leave Polenstjerna to-morrow, having

first solemnly promised that under no circumstances will he return."

"Ebba," Bengt asked, with a quiet smile of admiration at this womanly generosity, "do you approve?"

"Settle it, settle it as you please," was the listless answer from the corner where my Lady sat.

"And M. Martin?" Bengt inquired, politely.

"Will the word of a liar and a spy be sufficient?" I demanded.

Bengt gently raised his eyebrows. "We will take your word," he replied, coolly, "if you will repeat the promise in the presence of us all."

Utterly weary, I repeated the words as he pronounced them—to leave Polenstjerna and never to return.

There was a pause.

"To-morrow," Bengt concluded, pleasantly, "you will depart and to-morrow you will be free."

"But remember," Karl said, hotly, "that if you ever show your face here again we shall not hesitate to treat you as liars and spies are treated in Sweden."

Bengt put his hand on his arm. "M. Martin is no coward," he remarked, with emphasis, "but I am sure he will not forget what has happened in this room."

He courteously opened the door; I walked in a dream towards it.

"M. Martin—" The cry came from my pupil, who had thrust herself between me and the door. I waited, trembling.

"It is not too late," she pleaded, "to confess. Do not leave us—me—with a lie upon your lips. Confess and I will forgive you—and——"

The sight of her fair young face, white with the agony of what she had endured, so proud and womanly in its righteous appeal, unmanned me.

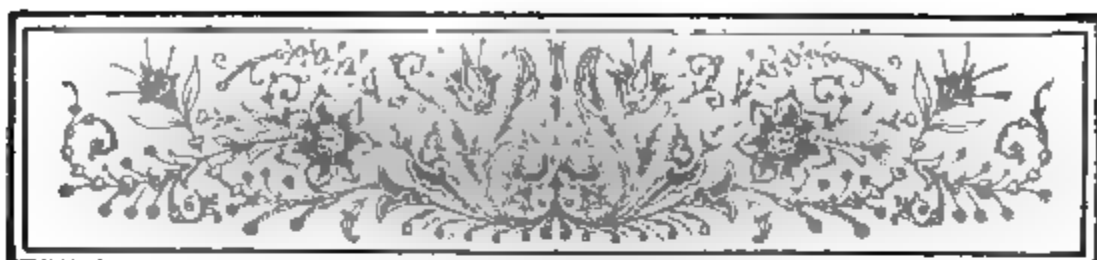
"Oh! speak, speak," she whispered, "before it is too late."

But a yeoman can be proud, too. "If I had anything to confess," I said, choking, "I would confess. I have nothing to say. Let me go!"

Her face hardened. "Then go!" she said, with a smiting scorn. "Go, and may God soften your stubborn heart! Go!"

And I went, sobbing, as she was sobbing.





CHAPTER XVII

A GAME OF HIDE-AND-SEEK

THE blow had fallen. Impotent, helpless, deserted, alone, I had been dismissed from Polenstjerna Castle, and branded as a liar and a spy. Reeling shock had been piled on reeling shock. Last of all my Lady had abandoned me. Ruin, shame, and disgrace, mystery that tortured,—that was the past, that was the present, that was the future.

I lay on my bed in a numbing stupor, knowing nothing, thinking nothing, heeding nothing, unable to pray even for the deliverance of death.

A step and a light passed into my chamber ; a hand was laid on my shoulder and stirred me. I shook it off. It stirred me again ; again I shook it off. It stirred me a third time ; I struggled to my feet, and strove to wipe away the mist clogging my eyes.

“ Ah ! ” I sat down. My tongue clove to my throat.

It was my Lord Bengt, impassive as ever, gazing at me in the chill twilight.

He sat down beside me. “ What was in that packet which you took to Dresden ? ” he asked, gently.

I shook my head. I was not to be trapped a second time.

“ The Fru Countess lied,” he said, simply. “ You told the truth. I believed you then, I believe you now.”

The tears started into my eyes. Was I dreaming ?

“ I believe you,” he repeated.

Then I sobbed outright. My Lord waited till I was calm.

"Be frank and brave," he said, "and you may still save your good name. But remember, you and I have no time to lose."

I clutched at his arm to peer into his eyes.

"Before you went to Dresden," he pursued, with ruthless calm, "I discovered my aunt and cousin were engaged in some secret and deep intrigue. Bit by bit I have learned the truth, and I was pained to find that you, M. Martin, were mixed up in it——"

"That is not true!" I cried, passionately.

He shrugged his shoulders very gently. "Let us say, rather, that you had been dragged into it. You imagined you were doing something innocent. In reality, you were the tool in a conspiracy—" he paused to smile.

"A conspiracy!" I sank back on the bed.

"Yes, a conspiracy is what I have discovered."

"But to do what? to do what?"

"Ah! that is the difficulty. Perhaps you will tell me?"

"I, Herr Grefve? I?"

"Reflect a little. You took a packet from the Fru Countess to the Graf von Flemming; you brought a letter back; that is so, is it not?" I nodded. "Now, what did that packet and that letter contain?"

"I have not an idea."

He was both baffled and puzzled. "This is very extraordinary," he murmured. "I confess you astonish me. Indeed, I cannot but fear you have been made, in a way I never expected, the wretched tool of a vile plot."

"The tool, Herr Grefve?" The horrible chill in his voice brought the sweat out on my brow.

"If," he said, deliberately, "as I more than suspect, that packet was a part of the conspiracy, you have made yourself a partner to it." It was as if he had dangled a rope gracefully over my head.

"But I know nothing, nothing—I swear it."

He smiled, pityingly. The rope dropped a few inches

nearer. A noose hung at its end, and the noose touched my ears.

"Let us recall what happened," he said, mercilessly. "You journey to Dresden—a secret messenger ; you return, a secret messenger, at the request of the Graf von Fleming ; you profess to be the tutor ; you swear you are utterly ignorant ; I may believe you, M. Martin, but do you think the King and the King's Councillors will ?"

"The King !" I put up my hand. The noose had hitched itself round my throat and choked my utterance.

"Yes, the King. Before long this will be a matter for the King." He paused to moisten his lips. "And what if my aunt and my cousin assert that you did know from the first,—in short, that you were in their pay ?"

It was not my Lord Bengt speaking ; it was a trusted captain of Trabants about to arrest me. The Fru Countess and my Lord Karl ! My word against theirs !

O God ! I had learned what they meant.

He snuffed the candle with a gruesome snap of his finger and thumb. "Are you dealing quite frankly with me ?" he asked. "Had you not better say honestly all you know ?"

I looked at his unruffled, stern face. Could I trust him ?

"Last night," he rose and faced me, "last night, M. Martin, you must have found the Graf von Waldschlösschen in King Eric's Tower."

"Yes," I answered, "I was appalled to find the Graf there. But he would tell me nothing."

The candles flickered. I confess it sounded wholly improbable, not to say impossible.

"I have told you the truth," I persisted, wildly. "Accident took me to the Tower. The rest you know, Herr Grefve. Were his Majesty to put me on the rack I could not reveal what has never been revealed to me."

He was musing. "You have been a sad fool," he said, pityingly.



"Indeed I have. I have been duped, tricked, betrayed. And now I am ruined."

"No," he checked me, sharply. "Not quite. You have been duped, but I believe you." He offered me his hand with a calm dignity.

"Herr Grefve!" I cried, and choked.

"Would you save yourself and win back your good name?" he asked, earnestly.

"Save myself!"

"Then listen. Briefly, a conspiracy is on foot in which my aunt, aided by the Graf von Flemming, has persuaded my unhappy cousin to take part. The main plotter is," he paused, "the Graf von Waldschlösschen——"

"The Graf——" I sprang up in abject terror.

"Yes, our gallant friend. I was tricked into believing he had left Sweden. Two days ago a happy accident enabled me to track him here, just as yourself by accident had done the same. Unfortunately for you, the blind and ignorant tool, you had learned too much. And the Graf or my aunt or both drove my wretched cousin into stopping your mouth in the only way possible. Luckily for you I also had learned too much, and they will not find it so easy to stop my mouth."

The ring of revenge, of coming triumph, shot a cruel suspicion into my mind.

"And the Fröken Countess?" I stammered.

"My cousin, thank God! knows nothing. M. Martin, she must never know. It would kill her. I confess without shame I deceived her this morning, and what has since happened has in the most wonderful way kept her ignorant."

His bloodless resolution set me clenching my fists. I had been the tool of the Fräulein Countess, a woman's dupe; I had been the tool of the Graf. I ground my teeth. My character and good name had been ruined that my Lady might be hoodwinked, and they, the plotters, go scot-free. We would see, we would!

"You are angry, and I do not wonder," continued the imperturbable Bengt. "Have patience. And I beg you to remember you are not the only victim in disgrace." He smiled at my bewildered stare.

"I took the liberty," he continued, "to tell my cousin and aunt plainly what I thought. I have warned them. And my reward? my reward is M. Martin's reward,—to be denounced, abused, and dismissed."

I shuddered. He looked so horribly like the black Field Marshal who, I had read, had more than once put even German women to the Swedish torture in order to wring information from them. In my fierce wrath I had been on the point of making a clean breast of how the Graf had cozened a bookworm's innocence. "Keep your eyes on Count Bengt!" It was Kätchen suddenly whispering in my ear. I stopped the passionate confession in time.

"And what is the object of this conspiracy?" I asked, cautiously.

My Lord smiled. "I can only guess," he answered, "but I am positive it has two objects,—to stop the 'Reduction' and," he smiled, nay, laughed, "to force the King to give his consent to the marriage of my cousin."

"Ah!" My mind flew back to the closet of the would-be master of Dresden. My Lord had surely guessed right.

"And we—what can we do?" I asked, in eager hope.

"Have patience," he muttered, in passionless reproof, "and remember, the safety of the King is perhaps at stake.

Remember the shame hanging over my house, the house of the Polenstjernas. Your honour, my honour! what are they the honour of my cousin, the Countess Ebba, the head of the Polenstjernas?" a sudden thrill of glorious fire shook my bloodless voice. "I could go to the King now, I could crush the conspiracy in five minutes, and we, the Polenstjernas, whose name is as great and pure as that of King Charles himself, would be forever the scorn and infamy of

Sweden. I cannot, will not do it; for the sake of the innocent Grefvinna, my cousin, do not ask me, M. Martin."

His passion swept me off my feet. Ask him to ruin my Lady? No!

"We cannot act," he said, quite calm again, "until we know the whole truth."

"It may come too late," I cried, plunged again into the depths of despair.

"Perhaps. We must hazard that. You saved my cousin from Dresden: you must help me to save him now from the scaffold."

My pupil had forsaken me. The Fru Countess had lied to my face. My Lord Karl had denounced me. Revenge lay in my grasp. Something choked me. Wronged as I had been I could not—no, I could not snatch at it.

"Yes, Herr Grefve," I said, "I will help you."

"Thank you. Let us save my cousin from his folly, and we shall give you back your good name, I promise."

My heart leaped. I had judged hastily. My Lord Bengt was strong, perhaps merciless, but he was generous and he was just.

"How? how?" I implored.

"Let us unravel the truth to the bottom, and then we can stamp out this dastard scheme ourselves. Do you follow me?"

"Indeed I do not, my Lord."

He sat down; his voice fell. "The Graf von Waldschlösschen will tell us," he said, lightly, and laughed low as I jumped. "The Graf is still in King Eric's Tower. He was brought here to weave his abominable plots, and now he is at our mercy."

The sweat oozed out on my brow. His stern manner had set the hateful twitching of the noose about my ears.

"The papers," whispered my Lord, "the papers are with him in King Eric's Tower. Those papers we must have."

we have laid him by the heels we shall know the worst the rest will be simple."

was aghast. My Lord's passionless eyes were digging into my breast.

"You do not know the Graf," he proceeded in his low, tones; "he is without honour and mercy; he has made my happy cousin and my unhappy aunt the victims of his passion, and he thinks to make you and me the tools"—he uttered the horrible words with icy deliberation, and I felt a guish squeezing the blood from my cheeks, "but he will come to the end of his tether. Yes, his time is up; in an hour we shall know the truth."

Truth! Was ever wretched man in so desperate a case as I was? This—this was my Lord's comfort. This was to win back my good name!

"We are going to arrest him," he said briskly, rising. "There is not a minute to lose."

"Arrest him!" I cried. "And then?"

"Well, that will depend on the Graf himself, and what he can do. Come."

"I stumbled to my feet. "Take your sword," he said, "and you may need it," and he laughed with a pleasantness which made me run hot and cold. "Our friend is a dangerous man, as you know; we may have to spill some blood in arresting him."

"Did my Lord Karl?" I stammered.

"No! poor dupe, there will be no need to arrest *him*! He is doubt happy at this moment with the Fröken Countess and her mother, or may be with the *brännvinn* and a plump girl from the village. You really do not imagine, my friend, I have not thought of that?"

While I fumbled with my sword he blew out the candles and healthily opened the door. "The way is clear," he said, cheerfully. "Courage! Think of the secrets you are going to learn, disagreeable secrets, I fear."

He strode swiftly and silently down the corridor to the

lobby outside the great hall. No one was stirring save a couple of men servants who took no notice of us ; they saw, as was very natural, simply the Herr Grefve Bengt and Monsieur Martin whom they might see any day. They knew nothing of the double quarrel which had rent the Polenstjernas in twain ; they did not know the tutor and his noble guide were liars and spies who had been ruined and dismissed.

Along the corridor we hastened, and once more we were in front of the oiled door. It was locked. My Lord produced the key with a grim smile and noiselessly admitted us to that awful *Salle des Pas Perdus*.

Putting his finger on his lip he halted and listened with the air of a bloodhound, and so loud was the beating of my wretched heart that I could not hear the icy wail of the wind sweeping over the broken flags ; I could not smell the taint of dead men's bones, perhaps because to men who are doomed, mercifully is denied the privilege of the living.

"Wait !" whispered my Lord. "Stand here with your back to the door and guard it, if necessary, as you would guard your life."

As far as I could judge in the darkness he crawled away from my side on his hands and his knees. I was alone.

What was I to do ? What was I to say when confronted with the Graf ? I had done nothing wrong ; my hands were clean, yet so deep was I set in the toils that the truth must damn me in my Lord Bengt's eyes, and in my Lady's, blacker than I was already. I, who had acted with a pure conscience, would be revealed as one who for months had been as guilty as if I had plotted and planned. My silence, my very innocence and ignorance, were to ruin me even more completely than they had ruined me already. I prayed God in that horrible darkness that either the Graf or I might be spared that meeting. Death in a dirty scuffle on those steps, where already I had been within an inch of my life, were better than to face the utter ignominy of the truth, the truth *which* was to make me free and restore my fair fame.

A sudden comfort rose in my mind. There were papers ; surely they would clear me. Would they ? Supposing my enemies, those who had used me as their tool, had put things into the papers which condemned me, where would be my denials then ? The past thronged with cruel vividness before me. " We shall hold you responsible," had been the stern words with which I had been dismissed from the closet of the would-be master of Dresden. Everyone in this hellish plot knew my share, everyone save my Lord Bengt and my Lady. Yes, I was doomed—doomed.

A faint, low whistle echoed piercingly and fell ; it was repeated after a minute's pause. Then all was silence. I wiped the sweat from my face and stared into the dark. Oh ! why had I not thrown that packet into the sea ? why had I not gone to England ? Why ? Because I had learned to love my Lady, and that love would now ruin me.

My Lord had crawled out of the gloom.

" That whistle," he whispered, " was a signal to my man. He has been watching here since midday. You heard nothing else ? "

" No."

He stooped down and groped along the wall. The next instant he struck fire and lighted a torch. Torch and tinder had been carefully placed in a cranny for the purpose.

Then he coolly tried the lock of the great door and drew his sword. " You had better," he said, with a significant gesture. I drew mine ; but what use would it be against the Graf ? " Take the torch," he commanded, " and when we come to the stairs, halt ! "

We went forward on tiptoe. I halted as I was bidden. The door leading to the chamber of the White Countess was wide open. All was darkness within. My Lord looked at me and I at him. Something was wrong.

" I do not understand where my servant is," he said, slowly. " I hope there has been no foul play here."

He peered round, moved a few steps backwards and forwards, but not a trace of a living soul was to be seen.

"By God!" burst from his lips, "if he has escaped us!"

He seized the torch from me and dashed up the steps.

I flew after him; I would welcome death in the open, but I had no desire to be stabbed in the back at the foot of the White Countess's stairs.

The chamber was empty; the fire had burnt itself out. On the table were a glass and a flagon half full and two candlesticks in which the candles had guttered down and scorched the sockets. The White Countess from above the arms of the Polenstjernas—"Pro Deo! Pro Fide! et Pro Suecia!"—surveyed us with a mocking mournfulness.

My Lord closed the door and locked it; then he calmly set the torch above the hearth to command the entrance to the inner room. A man coming out thence would have a flare in his eyes. He must be spitted; nothing could save him.

"It is eight o'clock," he said, "and the Graf was here at six. Nor has he passed out beyond the *Salle des Pas Perdus*, for the corridor has been watched. Those servants in the lobby signalled they had seen nothing. The Graf must be here."

The sweat dripped from my cheeks. This was the man in whose power I was,—a man who thought of everything, knew everything, was prepared for everything. God help those who fell into his hands—and I was one!

He stood listening; he was in no hurry; his victim was here. Yet he was not at ease. Not even my Lord Bengt could remain unruffled in this eery chamber with the eyes of the White Countess upon him.

A muffled sound like the mew of a tiny starving kitten stole out from the inner chamber. Something moved, just moved, behind the moth-fretted curtain.

"Go up quietly by the wall," whispered my Lord, "and when I raise my hand wrench the covering towards you."

Obey I must. I crawled along the wall and seized the hem of the flapping cloth. My Lord stole in front of it, his sword in one hand, a second torch, which he had found, in the other. Murder was in his eyes, and I watched in a fascination of breathless fear.

A full minute passed. His hand went slowly up. I tugged. The rotten curtain gave way, and rolled me on my back, strangling and choking me in its mildewed folds.

"Now, sir!" I heard him cry in triumph. But no one came forth.

He lowered the torch and strode forward. "*Herr Jesus!*" he exclaimed, with such a savage rage that I bounded to my feet and pressed after him. The light of the flaring torch fell on a straw pallet, and on it lay a man blindfolded, gagged, and bound hand and foot. It was the missing servant—and the Graf had escaped!

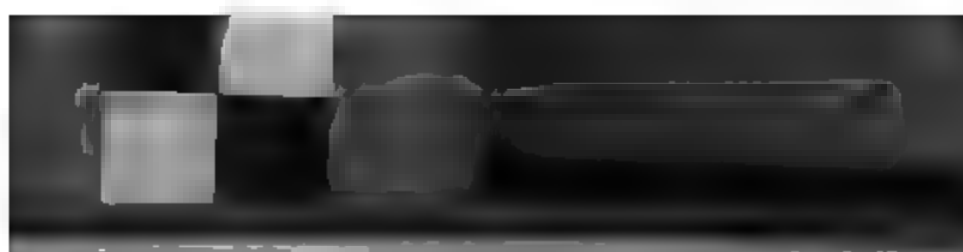
I could have howled with joy. My prayer had been heard and I was saved, saved for the present! The Graf had bilked my Lord Bengt.

Three slashes with a sword, and what there was to know had been stammered out. Some two hours ago the watcher in the *Salle des Pas Perdus* had been pounced on in the dark, throttled, gagged, and bound, and on this bed he had lain ever since, expecting instant death. What had happened since he did not know, but it was not difficult to imagine.

"Our bird has flown," Bengt remarked, pressing his lips together. "Pah! be off, you worthless rascal! Go to the hall and find what the news is. Off with you!"

The wretched creature slunk away as well as his numbed limbs would permit.

Bengt sat down. His anger vanished like smoke; he was as alertly unruffled as I had ever seen him. "I have troubled you for nothing, M. Martin," he remarked. "No matter, we shall have our friend yet. As you are aware, there is no way out save by the great door and the corridor."



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"What of the windows and the dungeons?" I suggested, cheerfully.

He shook his head. "No man," he answered composedly, "not even the Graf, could get through that window; the dungeons are full of ice and water. It is impossible. But we will search."

And search we did every nook and cranny, though we might have spared ourselves the pains. The Graf had clean gone, leaving no trace of his presence save one, and that was an insult. Pinned to the inner side of the moth-fretted curtain was a piece of paper with these words hastily scribbled in French:

"To the Comte de Polenstjerna, greeting: I shall be happy to wait on your Lordship when you desire my presence next—at Dresden. Till then, I kiss your hands and remain, your very obedient servant, the Graf von Waldschlösschen."

My Lord laughed, as he folded the message and put it in his pocket. "Mere bravado, M. Martin," he said, contemptuously. "Our friend will never reach Dresden. And it will be worse for him at Stockholm than at Polenstjerna."

But for all his stout words and calm confidence he was baffled. Fate or skill had outmatched my Lord Bengt, and the Graf had scored the first trick in this singular duel; but let him who wins laugh last; it needed not to look at my Lord's face to see that the first trick was not the whole game.

More serious news followed. The servant came panting back to announce that my Lord Karl had left his mother's parlour, ordered his sleigh an hour ago, and departed, taking the road to Stockholm.

My Lord reflected for twenty seconds. "Good!" he said. "Go and order my sleigh. I leave in ten minutes." His eyes were more than ever like the eyes of the black Field Marshal.

For the first time that evening I became aware of the numbing cold.

"My cousin," explained my Lord, "has gone to join the Graf at Stockholm. Nothing could be better for our purpose. It will spare us a scene at Polenstjerna."

"We go, then, to Stockholm, too?"

"I shall go," he answered composedly. "You will be so good as to remain at Polenstjerna."

"And the Graf?" I asked, anxiously.

"That must depend on himself. If he values his own skin he will hold his tongue, as I mean my cousin to do."

We returned across the *Salle des Pas Perdus*. He carefully locked the great door and sealed the lock with his own signet. "No one will trouble you now," he said, smiling. "You can sleep with a good conscience, M. Martin."

"You have forgotten, Herr Grefve, that I have promised to leave Polenstjerna to-morrow. If——"

"No, I have not forgotten. I shall not fail you. When my cousin returns you will have something to say to him and the Fru Countess, and I particularly desire to be present. Good night!"

Without more ado he went his way and I mine.

That morning I had been free—that afternoon I was ruined—but to-night I was the prisoner of my Lord Bengt.





CHAPTER XVIII

THE SECRET OF KING ERIC'S TOWER

TO sleep with a good conscience!" To sleep while those sleighs chased each other to Stockholm, when cousin would be confronting cousin, when the Graf had escaped by a miracle, and I must either leave Polenstjerna a liar and a spy or face my Lords Karl and Bengt with a tale which no man could believe—the man who in my shoes would have slept must have been either a beast or a god.

In a feverish pet I flung the casement open—to seek comfort in the bitter embrace of the Northern air and starry sky which makes their child, the Swede, what he is.

I gasped, but not with cold. A light had flashed through the sullen windows of King Eric's Tower. Another! Another! And see! It was gone. Nothing but blackness now topping the frozen moat and the banks white with snow. I slammed the casement to. I was mad, drunk, dreaming. A light in King Eric's Tower! it was impossible unless—a mysterious witchery drew me back to the window. I craned my neck. Nothing—nothing! Yes! I was going mad—mad—mad!

I grew sleepy, I dozed, but I would not leave the window.

I dreamed that a man called me—"Hst! Hst!"—I started.

From beneath, up from the murky shadows of the moat floated a low "Hst!" Then again, "Hst!" I shook myself. There it was a third time—"Hst!"

From the window to the ice might be fifteen feet. As I

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live, something dark crouched in the shadow of the masonry; it was a man! "Hst!" floated up for the fourth time. The man moved.

"Let down your sheets for a rope," came the startling command. "I must climb up."

Without replying I ran, stripped the sheets from the bed, ripped them with my sword, twisted them together, and lowered them.

"Hold fast," said the voice. I planted my feet against the skirting, and gripped the end. A long tug. The man at the other end was trying the rope—a pause—a long strain. I could hold no longer. Ah! I dropped forward. The Graf was scrambling in at the window.

"Bravo! It's a famous bookworm!" he cried gaily, as he leaped with the lightness of a cat to the floor, and I rocked myself to and fro in an exquisite relief. With a deep grunt he pushed the oak chest in which I stored my clothes against the door.

I glared at him, crouching on the floor. It was hard to convince myself I was dealing with a man of real flesh and blood. He sat down by my fire, heaped on wood, and blew on his fingers, humming all the while a silly French pot-house lay.

"How the devil do you manage to be here?" I asked, fiercely.

"Because," he said, kneeling down with a low laugh before the blaze, "I know more than my Lord Bengt."

I rose and seized his arm. "We are past jesting," I said, sternly. "Do you know I have only to open that door and a cat's-paw can send you to swing at Stockholm?"

"Thank you," he replied, rubbing his hands. "But I have no desire to swing at Stockholm. I have had enough of your swinging out there." He grinned, actually grinned, and my Lord Bengt was speeding to Stockholm!

"I repeat, I am tired of being your dupe. You shall explain or——"

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He flung up his arms. "Explain ! / explain ! Why, I have come here at the risk of my neck to insist upon an explanation from you." He licked his lips placidly.

I looked into his eyes. He had treated me cruelly, but, conspirator though he was, I would rather trust him than my Lord Bengt, and if he would not do me justice he should answer for it to the King at Stockholm.

"I see," he said, quickly; "you have something to tell me. I thought so. Now out with it!"

I sat down by the fire and laid bare the whole truth, from the horrible moment when I had offended my Lady by revealing my love, to my farewell an hour ago by the sealed and oiled door. He listened, rubbing his hands thoughtfully. Only one exclamation broke my narrative. At the word "arrest," a deep oath growled round the wainscoting, and the little black eyes riveted on my face blazed like the northern lights. My Lord Bengt had not misjudged. Blood would have been spilt in disarming him.

I had finished. "You poor dupe," was all he said, "you poor dupe!"

"Dupe! yes," I snarled, "but I will be a dupe no longer. Give me back my honour, which you have stolen, or, by heaven——"

"Oh! you poor dupe," he muttered, and laid a finger on my sleeve. "Why, my Lord Bengt," he whispered, "is in the conspiracy, as he calls it."

"What!" I staggered to my feet.

"It is God's truth. My Lord Bengt has plotted with me from the first. And you, my poor, poor bookworm, have not discovered it."

I dropped on my bed. The room reeled round me.

"The arch-knave," he said, "the damnable arch-knave! I'll bilk him yet; I'll bilk him as I have bilked him already."

I moaned with anguish and fear.

"I thought it would come to this," he said, musingly.

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"Come to what? How long will you babble in riddles to an ignorant man?"

"Riddles! I wish it were a riddle. Cannot you see that to save his own skin he will compel my friend Karl and the Fru Countess to hold their tongues, and if need be he will send you and me to the scaffold?"

"But if he is in the plot he must be ruined himself."

"Ah! that's just where his devilish cunning comes in. Have you forgotten the papers of which he spoke? Bengt knows the importance of those papers, and they have disappeared. He thinks his cousin knows where they are. But," he grinned, "he does not. There is only one man in all Sweden who has that secret, and that man is your humble servant. Perhaps now you can grasp how necessary I am to my Lord Bengt."

"No," I said, bluntly, "I do not grasp, quite."

"Well, supposing my Lord finds me before Karl is aware of what he is doing, secures the papers, destroys some and keeps the others, he may appear innocent and yet prove everyone else guilty of treason."

I sat trying to comprehend this deviltry; and a horrible thought leaped into my mind.

"The Fröken Countess," I sobbed, "is she, too, in the plot?"

"No, my bookworm," he answered gravely, "she knows nothing."

"You will swear it, Graf?"

"I will swear it," he said, in the same grave tones; "she is as innocent and ignorant as you were."

If my Lady had been a conspirator I must have turned my face to the wall and gone to ruin without lifting a finger. But the world was still fair; the mistress whom I loved was free from stain. Thank God for it, thank God for it!

The Graf was eyeing me with a gentle pity. "Would heaven," he said, earnestly, "I had never put my hand to

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this business ! Had I to do it over again not all the gold in Dresden would bring me to Polenstjerna. Curse them," he burst out savagely, "curse their dirty hearts and their devilish ambitions ! But the mischief is done now, and it might have been far worse had I not come to this castle and had my share in this infernal affair. Ah ! I took the measure of my Lord Bengt from the first hour I saw him, and he and I have been wrestling for the mastery ever since. The fight is not done yet, by God ! no. And he knows it as well as I do. Why, man, he has the finest, coolest, deepest head that either of us is likely to meet, and I have met a few. We, my Lord Bengt and I, could conquer the world, and," he added, with a quaint smile, "a woman, as usual, is at the bottom of the trouble."

"Do you mean the Fröken Countess ?"

"No one less. That day on the battlements of King Eric's Tower—do you remember it?—I swore he should never marry her and——"

"What! do you——"

"*Allmächtiger Gott!* no," he laughed at my vehemence. "I am not so young or so foolish as to dream of that, but for all that I swore he should not have her. The mischief is that she, your Fröken Countess, loves him, adores him, because he is a man, and such a man, as a country only breeds once a century——"

"Say, rather, Graf, she, my Lady, is a woman such——"

"Do not I know it? And he loves her; God! he worships her and would give his soul to win her, and I do not wonder. But mark my words. His love will ruin him. The deep, cool head that no man can turn, that can be turned by one woman, and one woman alone out of all the beautiful women in the world, is always ruined. If my Lord could only love two women, better still, three, he would be the greatest man in Europe. It is safer to be as Augustus the Strong and love them all, or like my master, *monsieur le petit abbé*, Prince Eugène, and hate 'em all; for

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the wreck that one woman will make in a strong man's life is damnable ; yes," he repeated, fiercely, "damnable."

He stared savagely at his boots. In the scorching passion of that utterance glowed much more than the experience of a woman-beset life—it was the tragic cry of a lacerated soul. Had gossip at Dresden been right after all ?

"Tell me," I said, gently, "of the plot, not of my Lord Bengt."

The Graf whistled to recover his calmness.

"You are aware," he said, quietly, "what the Fru Countess desires—the lands of Karl restored, the 'Reduction' stopped, and her niece for her son. The plot, as you call it, is an intrigue to secure these things."

My disappointment was intense. It was no more than what my Lord Bengt had guessed.

"But where is the treason ?" I asked. "And what have you to do with it ?"

"Oh ! that is another matter." His eyes twinkled. "I am not so sure I can tell you about that." He nursed and warmed his fingers for some time.

"Did you ever hear of one Patkul ?" he demanded, suddenly.

"I have seen him at Dresden," I answered, with a shudder.

"The devil you have ! Well, it occurred to him and some other persons, notably our friend his Excellency, what a delightful thing it would be to strip a young king of some of his ill-gotten possessions——"

"What do you mean ?" I asked, hotly.

"Never mind. I want you to listen, not to interrupt. A gentleman, who shall be nameless, returning from a campaign in Flanders, where he saw the taking of Namur, happened to be in Dresden and to enjoy some hours of his Excellency's company. As a result his Excellency writes to that gentleman's aunt, a Polish lady with whom he had flirted when they were both much younger and wiser, and his fertile



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brain suggests 'Why not join your little scheme for forcing a king to do what you want with my little scheme to do the same?' The Polish lady in Sweden jumps at the idea, and holds out a glorious future—a discontented nobility, an impoverished land, a boy monarch who is idiot enough to insist on having his own way, and who particularly favours an odious nephew. Accordingly her son is bidden to leave Paris for Dresden and there he, too, talks at much length with his Excellency, who, by the way, is much distressed that the son should go out of his way to fall in love with a lady already married, that lady being——"

"Never mind the lady, Graf, I know enough about her."

"Quite right," he retorted, sharply. "The less said about the wanton the better. To resume, a great friend of the son is persuaded to journey to Polenstjerna to spy out the land, to arrange with the mother, and to defeat the subtle nephew. Persuaded, poor dupe,—mark you, poor dupe, I say,—that if he succeeds, immense will be his reward. Karl will win back his lands, will marry his cousin, and the Graf von Waldschlösschen—pah! he knew his Excellency of old, but," he rose and kicked at a smouldering log, "he did not know that wanton, the Princess Rapirska."

"Graf," I cried, "what are you——"

"It was she," he muttered, "as I have learnt, thanks to you, who persuaded me to come to Polenstjerna," he paused, "that she might keep the love of the King, damn her, and him, too!"

He sat down and stared at the fire. "Let us return," he began, pleasantly, "to Polenstjerna. What do I find here? To tell the honest truth, I do not know which I feared or distrusted more, the noble mother or the odious nephew. But there are compensations, to wit, the Fröken Countess, bless her golden hair! and," he shrugged his shoulders, "and the tutor. The Fru Countess is all fire and fury; she insists on admitting Bengt to the secret; I refuse; we are *only* agreed that Karl must return forthwith. I must, more-

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over, communicate with my masters at Dresden ; I must tell them that they had better drop this ugly business or at least drop the Fru Countess. I cannot go myself ; not for worlds would I leave Bengt and his aunt here alone, and so by good luck I discover an amiable——"

"Cat's-paw, tool, go-between," I murmured, ferociously.

"A cultivated young gentleman with his head stuffed with book-learning, and worshipping the owner of golden hair and a pair of blue eyes,—now do not interrupt,—a gentleman whom it will do a vast amount of good to see the real world and some other equally adorable owners of bright eyes and pink cheeks. Apparently Madam behind my back has had the same idea, and so off goes the cultivated young gentleman with a packet in which I request the masters at Dresden to give up the game as too dangerous. But I do not know that Madam by the same messenger implores the exact opposite. You follow? So, adieu to the love-sick tutor, and while he is enjoying himself at Dresden——"

"'Enjoying himself!'" It was my turn to kick the smouldering log.

"Oh! hold your tongue. While he is enjoying himself at Dresden things go to the devil here. The Fru Countess lets it all out to Bengt, without telling me, and the pair plunge up to the neck in treason."

"But why should Madam be such a fool?"

"Because, my dear innocent, she has always Poland to fly to, and she would, failing all else, ruin her nephew. A woman's revenge, my——"

"Go on," I said, hotly, "go on!"

"Well, one fine day my Lord Bengt comes to me. Suspicion is roused in Sweden, says he, and so he, mark you! he brings me from time to time to that cursed tower to protect me, *me!* *Allmächtiger Gott!* I am dying of *ennui*, and I play tricks which do not increase his or Madam's love for me."

"You—you were the ghost, then?"

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"Let us proceed," said the Graf, with a placid grin. "Presently back comes the love-sick tutor more love-sick than ever, and then, *Potztausend!* the game begins. Karl would wriggle out of it all, but he is between his mother and my Lord Bengt. The silly, passionate creature quarrels with Bengt—he quarrels with the Fröken Countess, he quarrels with the King, he even tries to quarrel with me, and then in sheer despair he allows his mother to push him into the mire right up to his neck."

"But why? Why?"

"Well, because the strings are so prettily pulled by my Lord Bengt. The plain fact is, both cousins are jealous, as jealous as they can be, of the love-sick tutor——"

"Jealous!" I howled.

"Oh! keep quiet. They cannot understand this simpleton; he has much influence with the Fröken Countess, he has done wonders at Dresden in the most marvellous way, and he has such curious ideas. Ask Kätchen about that," he remarked, with a snigger. "Worse, they think he has discovered the truth, and in the innocence of his heart, will go and blab it all out to the Fröken Countess, who believes in him, and ruin them both. Yes, he knows too much, this M. Martin, and he is anything but the gaping jack-pudding they took him for. So he must be crushed before he can do irreparable mischief——"

I ground my teeth.

"It enters the head of Karl that the tutor is really a spy in the pay of his Excellency, and everything bears it out, not least the deprecating defence of my Lord Bengt and the Fru Countess; and just at this point an extraordinary accident sends the tutor to me." The Graf stopped; a scowl of hatred settled on his face.

"Yes, yes," I cried, impatiently.

"I learn at last that his Excellency has been very busy, and more than ever he is determined to proceed. The time is ripe for a great *coup*, so the plot must go on." He eyed

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me gravely ; but I did not care for his Excellency and his schemes. The King and his Ministers could attend to them. " But I also learn," he muttered, clenching his fists, " that if his Excellency fails in his *coup* he and the King, my master—my master, *Gott im Himmel!*—will sacrifice myself without so much as a shrug of the shoulders. Rot them ! Rot them, I say ! "

" Yes, rot them ! " I murmured, as savagely as he.

" That settled it," he continued, with growing excitement. " From that moment I had done with the King and his Ministers and his wantons. If I must save myself by bilking them I would bilk them with pleasure. And it was high time to do something. The Fru Countess would ruin my Lord Bengt ; my Lord Bengt would ruin his aunt and his cousin ; they both would ruin you and me, and all because in God's wonderful providence a young woman has blue eyes and golden hair. Happily, there is an obstacle. I held the papers, and I hold them still, and something more which no one in Sweden knows but myself. However, before I can do anything, the blow has fallen, and you are done for."

" Explain, dear Graf, explain if you can."

" I take it they could not let you go free. Had they not discovered you had seen me ? You fool, you were tracked to the Tower that night. Why, man, they thought—who would not have thought it ?—that you had them in your mercy. So they ruined you, above all, ruined you in the eyes of the Fröken Countess, who will not believe a word you say now. It was very neatly done, upon my word ! In the hands of Bengt and Madam, poor Karl is more helpless than a babe at the breast."

Then I, too, clenched my fists and thirsted for revenge.

" Poor, poor Karl ! If any man is the cat's-paw he, not you, is the man. And the next thing he is driven to do is to quarrel with Bengt. Madam arranges that, because she knows where the papers are and Bengt does not, and she

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can indulge accordingly in some real womanly spite. It settles Bengt, however ; he is aware if he can lay me by the heels the game will be his. He has a head, and no mistake, has my Lord, for he first secures you."

"But me, ruined me ! why me ?"

The Graf struck the table impatiently. "Because, my good bookworm," he said coolly, "he must first discover how much you do know. What would be the use of arresting me when you can still take your secrets to the King or anyone else ? My Lord Bengt does not do things by halves, I can assure you. It was a magnificent *coup*—but"—he rubbed his hands and laid his finger on his nose—"but he forgot King Eric's Tower." He was bubbling with laughter.

"How did you do it ?" I asked, aflame with excitement.

"Long ago," he whispered, "I discovered a secret passage from that devil's trap of a tower. It is curious the Polenstjernas have forgotten its existence, but there it is, and it brings you down to the rocks by the sea. It's a fit entrance to hell, I can tell you. I caught my man very prettily in the *Salle des Pas Perdus*, and then I vanished. *Du lieber Gott !* It was as charming a game of hide-and-seek as ever I played in my life. And he's bilked—bilked ! Oh ! he is passing a delightful night, almost as delightful as we are." He rubbed his hands, blackened and bleeding with the rocks ; then he fumbled in his pocket, and for the first time was cool enough to take a pinch of snuff.

"And what is to be done now ?" I asked. "There is the plot——"

"Rather," he said, slowly, "there are two plots : the Polenstjerna plot and his Excellency's. The latter we cannot stop. If you must know what it is, it is a beautiful scheme to trip up that boy King at Stockholm."

"To aid the King of Denmark ?" I cried.

The Graf took another pinch of snuff. "Yes," he answered, "to aid the King of Denmark. We can," he was

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horribly in earnest, "we can do nothing in that affair. But the Polenstjerna plot we can and must stop. And stop it I will, if only to bilk that King of Poland, his wantons, Madam, and my Lord Bengt. Would you save the Fröken Countess, my bookworm?"

Would I? Would I? She had abandoned me, called me liar and spy. Would I?

"If the plot goes on," he said, gruffly, "the Fröken Countess will be ruined. She is innocent. We must stop it! stop it,—do you hear?"

"And how?" I was staring at my Lady's face, white with passionate loathing and contempt.

"There is only one way. You must go to Karl, poor lad! and——"

"Poor lad, indeed!"

"It is not his fault. He is sick of the whole affair. He has bolted from his mother thinking to find me at Stockholm. You must go to him, warn him, implore him, curse him, cajole him——"

"As a reward for all his gratitude to myself, I suppose——"

"Tut! tut! His mind has been poisoned. I will put that all right. But I beseech you, if you love your pupil, go and make him swear the plot shall be stopped."

It was a perilous game, this. But I thought of my Lady. For Karl I did not care, but her—I sprang up—her I would save, liar and spy though I had been called.

"And if I find Bengt at Stockholm?" I demanded, my brain afire.

"You will not. It is I that he wants and the papers. Have those papers he must or he is ruined. If you will not go, I must."

"No, Graf," I cried, "you shall not! I will not send you to swing at Stockholm. I will go."

He rose, tried to take a pinch of snuff, and failed. Tears dimmed his eyes.

"Thank you," he said, adding, with a sudden passion,

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"by God! Kätchen is right! You—" he held out his hand. I gripped it in silence. We understood each other.

"Give me pen and ink," he said; "I would write something before those cursed candles leave us in the dark. Quick, my cat's-paw!"

He scribbled busily while I watched the candles dying down. It was a breathless race against time, but the Graf won. As he finished his writing the last of the candles shot up, flared, and flickered out. We were in the dark, so cold and dark.

"There, my bookworm," he said, "are two letters—one for Karl, the other for yourself. Karl will understand what I have written; but this second is more serious. It contains information which— Promise me you will not open it unless you are in dire need."

If it had been the sentence of death of a whole nation his voice could not have been more awfully solemn.

"But what——?"

"Never mind. Should you fail to find Karl and are at your wits' end, open it and ponder thereon. It may help you to see what to do."

"I promise," I said. I took it, trembling, and fastened it inside my shirt, where I could feel it always.

"Good-bye!" he remarked, jauntily, as he took up the sheets and tried the knots carefully. "Pouf!" he cried, suddenly, "I am in rare fettle just now. I will go with you and run that arch-schemer through——"

"Indeed you shall not. Do you want to taste the dungeons of King Charles and swing for it into the bargain?"

"Then let us wait for Bengt here. We can settle the whole score in five minutes——"

"Wait here! here in Polenstjerna Castle! Your five minutes will settle the score in the *oubliettes* under the moat, and there is no secret passage from them."

"Ah, well!" he muttered, with a sigh, "my Lord Bengt

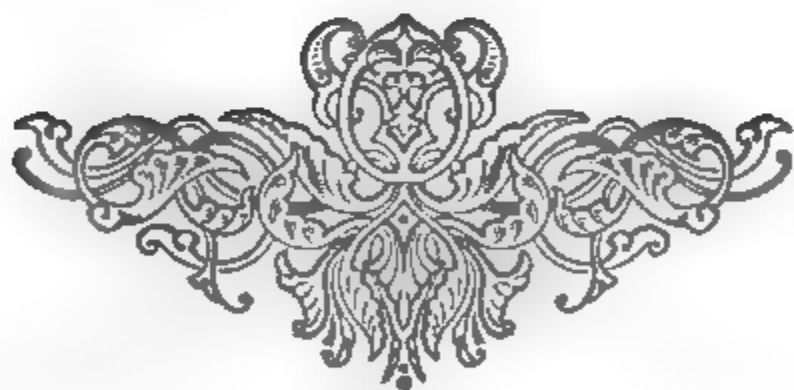
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and I shall meet some day and then—" he laughed. " You will find me at Dresden, my bookworm."

" Dresden ? "

" Yes, this cursed coil can only be unwound at Dresden. *Auf wiedersehen !* "

He dragged the bed to the window, fastened the sheets to the headpost, and swung himself out into the starry darkness. Should I ever see him again ? Not if my Lord Bengt could stop me. I knelt down and prayed. But I was in mightier hands than his now. If a just God ruled the world, I should still be able to save the honour of the Polenstjernas and my own.





CHAPTER XIX

THE FRUITS OF A WOMAN'S AMBITION

THE dawn broke wearily, the dawn of a day which was to save or ruin the Polenstjernas, and myself with them. Never did sleepless sufferer on his bed of pain welcome it with more passionate greeting than I did, for it found me riding on the road to Stockholm.

Ten minutes after the Graf had vanished, the embers of the dying fire laid bare the full meaning of the awful task laid upon me. Without help, without counsel, I must plan how to outwit the coolest, deepest head in Sweden.

For the moment I determined to imitate the Graf, drop from the window, and tramp the five-and-twenty miles to the capital. But two minutes' reflection dashed the idea to pieces. It would take me six hours at least to walk, and I should arrive more dead than alive. On my bodily strength, above all on the hours, hung lives and immortal souls. In six hours I could be followed and stopped. If I waited for daybreak, and cozened a horse from someone I should meet my Lord Bengt on the road, to a certainty, and that meant the *oubliettes* of King Eric's Tower. No, I must get away at once, and I must ride. And as I muttered the words savagely, I felt I might as well ask to fly.

An inspiration flamed into my mind. Why not—? I opened the door and peered out. The corridor was buried in slumber. I walked swiftly to the head of the stairs and then jumped back, for my foot had touched a man's body.

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Ah ! that was one of my Lord's watchers and he had fallen asleep. I crouched in the greatest distress, beaten. Ha ! down below there flickered a dim light. A faint ripple of laughter—the faintest coo of a girl's laughter—stole whispering up the darkness of the stairs. The weak beams of a fire in the outer hall danced feebly on the roof above my head. I crept to the balustrade and—Greta, as I was alive!—Greta, with her cousin Axel. He was on duty guarding the corridor to the oiled door, and that minx was helping him to brave the cold, and the terrors of the White Countess. The baggage ! but if ever a pair of truant lovers were in their right place that blessed pink-cheeked coquette and her swain were.

“ 'St ! ” I whistled, softly.

“ *Allmäktiga Gud !* ” I heard Greta sob. I put my finger to my lips and stole down. The couple awaited me as terror-stricken as if I were the dreaded spectre.

“ Greta,” I said, quickly, “ the Fröken Grefvinna is in the greatest danger. I must go to Stockholm, now, at once.”

And then I drew them both into the great hall and pleaded as I had never pleaded before and as I never will again.

I think it was the peril—which they felt but could not understand—threatening their beloved mistress that swept their timid resistance to the winds. I won—I won ! So long as there are women in the world, bless their hearts ! as the Graf had said, men will achieve the impossible. That night I achieved the impossible, and it was Greta's blue eyes and seductive girlhood that achieved it for me.

It was enough, more than enough, that by two o'clock I was riding in Axel's sheepskin cloak and on Axel's pony alone under the frosty stars along the road to Stockholm.

The servant at my Lord Karl's lodgings stared at my sleepless face with amazement. The Herr Grefve, he said, had gone out an hour past, saying he would be back shortly. He had not yet returned. We eyed each other, this servant and I, and then I gave him a stout silver piece and the Graf's letter. He promised his master should have it without fail

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and no one be the wiser. I begged him also to inform my Lord that I would come back in two hours, perhaps sooner.

Something in the man's look prompted me to speak. "Has the Herr Grefve Bengt been here?" I asked.

Yes, he had been here twice, and at eight o'clock he and my Lord Karl had gone away together. My Lord Karl had said he would be back immediately, and my Lord Bengt had laughed. That was all.

As I dared not show myself in the streets of Stockholm, I sought my hostelry and flung myself exhausted on one of its wretched beds. What if—?

I started. It was midday; the winter sun was shining, and I had slept for nearly three hours. This was the way I proposed to outwit the coolest, deepest head in Stockholm!

Mad with vexation, cursing my weakness, I rushed to my Lord Karl's. I had to knock three times, and when the servant came at last his face was as white as a sheet.

"Oh! sir," he burst out, wringing his hands, "the Herr Grefve is dying."

"Dying!" I tottered against the doorposts.

"He has been wounded, and he is dying." He began to sob.

"Wounded? Good God! By whom?"

"I do not know. They—the Herr Grefve Bengt—they brought him here, and the Herr Grefve Bengt is gone away, I know not whither, and my Lord is dying. What shall I do? What shall I do?"

"Let me see him at once—at once!" More than a notion of what had happened was making my heart thump wildly. Would I be in time?

I followed the man up the narrow, creaking stairs, and there in a small parlour, with the shutters half-drawn, lay poor Karl.

"I am the surgeon," said a man in dark clothes who rose from the bedside and bowed to me.

"The Herr Grefve—" I began and stopped.

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The surgeon shook his head. "Nothing can save him," he said, gravely: "the sword has gone clean through his body. I have done my best, at the Herr Grefve Bengt's request, but he is dying, sir."

Karl moved restlessly. "Who is that?" he asked, hoarsely. "Bengt, is that you?"

I flung myself on my knees by the bed. "It is Martin," I sobbed out. "Martin, from Polenstjerna."

"Martin?" he repeated, fixing feverish eyes vacantly upon me. "Martin! oh yes. M. Martin, the tutor, with a letter, not a dirty Jew." A pause. "Gentlemen," he muttered, "no," he laughed, "ladies and gentlemen, I give you the toast of the King of Sweden."

I bowed my head. It is an awful thing to hear the words brought back from a scene of dissipation by the wandering mind of a dying man.

"The King of Sweden, who is the King of Sweden?" he asked, mockingly. "There is no King of Sweden; he is dead—a boy, only a boy, is King of Sweden."

"Oh, sir!" I cried, "can you not do something?"

"No," answered the surgeon; "it is my duty to tell you that no power on earth can save him."

"What are you talking about?" moaned Karl. "Cannot you let me be? I am tired of talking. Why should we talk any more? It is time to strike——"

I shivered.

"Something," said the surgeon, "lies on his mind. After the Herr Grefve Bengt departed the servant gave him a letter; he read it and will not give it up. Perhaps——"

"Herr Doctor," I said quickly, "these are intimate family affairs. If you can do nothing, I beg——"

The surgeon bowed and retired. I knelt alone by Karl. The Graf's letter was crumpled in one hot hand, the fingers of the other picked ceaselessly at the blood-stained sheets. Thank God! he had been able to read. It might not be too late.

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"Curse it!" he muttered, "I will play no more. The devil's in the dice-box to-night. No, Graf, I'll not come away just yet. I tell you she's coming. Here, sweetheart, I'll toss you for a kiss. Just one, you baggage; you need not be so coy. *Gott!* I have kissed the mistress of a king." He tried to sit up. "Who the devil dares to say she is the mistress of a king?"

"My Lord, my Lord," I implored, "do you not know me?" Even to my dazed eyes the end was not far off. And I prayed he might not pass into the darkness just yet. A little while, only a little while, and we could be reconciled, forgiving and forgiven. "Oh! my Lord, do you not know me?"

"Who are you? Is it you, Bengt? Why do you come back? . . . No, it is not Bengt. I want Martin, Martin or the Graf."

"Martin is here," I whispered, "here, holding your hand."

"That is a lie," he pulled his hand away. "Another lie . . . all lies, all lies . . . Martin is at Polenstjerna, and the Graf . . . the Graf. . . ."

I wiped the sweat from his brow. Would God not hear my prayer? Such a little thing to ask!

"Don't send me away, Liliénchen; I won't go. I don't care if you are. . . . Flemming has promised, the King has promised. . . . What? . . . What? The King's mistress . . . you, *you* say so? . . . Ah! God! why did you not tell me long ago? . . . No, Graf, I will not sign unless Bengt signs . . . the head of the family, perhaps . . . why should we do what Patkul says . . . he is a traitor and so are we all . . . all . . . no, no, no! . . . Bengt has signed, has he? . . . let me see . . . pouf! take it away, there's blood on the paper."

He lay back exhausted.

"*Ebba* must not know," he began rapidly, "promise me,

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Mother, Ebba shall not know. I must have another two thousand, you bloodsucker, the jewels are not for me. I will take them to Ebba, she is not the mistress of a king . . . Ebba? Ebba? . . . she will not wear them . . . she hates me; Bengt, I tell you, she hates me . . . what is that you say? . . . because she has found out . . . who told her? . . . Martin? Pah! Martin, he hates me and I hate him."

"Oh, my Lord," I sobbed.

"Why are you crying? There is no use crying, Lilienchen. . . . I must go, yes, at once . . . and it will all come right; Bengt says so, and Bengt . . . Bengt . . . give me water, that *brännvinn* burns . . . a little water, if you please."

I moistened his lips.

"I do not know," he was beginning again, "I tell you I do not know, and if I did, I would not . . . you had betler find the Graf." If you have ever heard the laugh of a dying man, you, too, will not forget it till your dying day. "What! liar and traitor! oh! come, Bengt, we are both that . . . tell the King! . . . my mother a traitor! take care! . . . the papers, I have not got them . . . why not here? No one will see us . . . Ah! ah! . . . it's only a scratch, my foot slipped . . . quick! before anyone comes . . . promise not to tell . . . go, Bengt, go, before . . . ah! a little water, please."

His voice was growing fainter. "Who is that?" he cried, with a start. "Martin? A spy, yes, of course, he must be . . . you will explain . . . poor devil, turn him out . . . a spy? Oh, no! I was wrong, he is on my side, the Graf says . . . Bengt does not know, he must not . . . do not let him see the letter . . . Oh! why does he not come? Why? . . . Where am I? . . . I remember, surely . . ."

I moistened his lips again.

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"Martin is here," I whispered, very slowly, "Martin has come."

His eyes fixed on me vacantly. Would he never recognise me? Must he pass like this?

"Mother, Mother," he burst out, gaily, "Bengt and I have killed a bear, a big bear, and Ebba helped. . . . I will give her the skin, and Bengt . . . is that you, Bengt?"

"No, Herr Grefve, it is Martin—Martin——"

"Martin?" He was striving hard to master his fevered senses. "Martin," he muttered, "Martin has really come. I must remember to tell him . . . What was it? . . . must remember . . . water, please."

I bent over him, his voice was getting very faint.

"The Graf?" he asked, "the Graf?"

"Has escaped," I whispered, "escaped."

A low sigh of relief. "Escaped! . . . good! . . . Martin must escape, too," with an effort he put out a hand, which I took. A divine thrill of recognition swept through the mist of fever.

"Martin," I could just hear the words, "I understand . . . very, very sorry . . . forgive . . ." He lay back.

"Oh! my Lord, my Lord," I sobbed.

"Mother . . . Ebba . . . escape . . . save them . . ." A long pause, while his lips moved and I could not hear. Then I caught the words, "Ebba . . . the miniature . . . forgive. . . ."

Ten minutes later he had ceased to breathe; he died holding my hand, the Graf's note crumpled between our fingers. But my prayer had been answered. He had forgiven, as he was himself forgiven.

For a long while I sat, dry-eyed, unable to think or move. But the room would not let me sit in peace, for there was work to be done, what work I did not know exactly, but there was work to be done. I took the chain and locket

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from the dead man's neck ; they guarded a miniature of the White Countess, and it was stained now with Polenstjerna blood. That was the first duty. The second was gently to remove the Graf's letter from fingers growing stiff and cold. I burnt the letter and stood thinking. What next ? The sacred duty of saving the Polenstjernas had been repeated to me in this chamber, the duty of saving alike the woman, my pupil, who was innocent, and the woman who had wronged me with her lies. Yes, I must go back to Polenstjerna. I had fled as a felon flies ; I, a liar and a spy, had promised never to return, yet return I must. If I failed, I must fail ; but it was my duty, and my cause was just. The blood of the slain called for vengeance, but vengeance was not mine ; it was only mine to save, and save them I would.

Stay ! The Graf's second letter pressed on my heart. Was I not in dire need ? It would help me.

I flung the shutters open, and sitting by the dead man's bed I began to read. The paper fluttered down ; the room rocked round me in a blinding mist.

Then I sat up with such a fierce longing in my breast, such black, diabolical venom in my blood, that I could have been guilty of murder. For what I now read, a second time, in the Graf's hasty handwriting, was as follows :

“ When I swore that the Fröken Countess knew nothing I told you the truth. But there is more than I could dare to tell you then. Yesterday I learned from one of our secret agents that on February the ninth of this year, his Excellency, at the head of a Saxon and Polish army, treacherously attacked the Swedish city of Riga in Livonia. They cannot fail to take it, for the attack was to be made in full time of peace. Kätchen had prepared me for this vaguely, but I now know it is part of Patkul's and his Excellency's plan to ruin King Charles. A league has been formed between Denmark, Saxony, and the Czar to destroy Sweden ; they have carefully deceived the Swedes that they may do their work the better. At Stockholm they are ignorant of the league and

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of the attack on Riga, but the news must reach them before many hours. Sweden, I fear, is doomed.

“ If you would save the Fröken Countess you must induce Karl to stop the plot. Should Polenstjerna be searched and the papers found, plot or no plot, the Fröken Countess must be ruined. The papers of which I speak are in a secret case behind the portrait of the White Countess in the great hall. I placed them there, aware that no one would guess or mistrust their hiding-place. As you are aware, Bengt made it impossible for me to recover them. The Fru Countess alone is privy to this secret. I grieve to tell you that the Fröken Countess is implicated more than once in these papers. She signed one, thinking it was a petition to the King to abandon the ‘ Reduction.’ It was nothing of the sort. Bengt signed this, too. To another, the most serious of all, because his Excellency would not proceed without the signature of the Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna, the Fru Countess forged her signature. No one but myself and the Fru Countess knows this, and I only discovered it when it was too late. Needless to say, the Fröken Countess is as ignorant as yourself of what her aunt, for her own ends, has done. Should you ever read what I have written here, think well before you act. But remember, the news of Riga cannot be delayed. In two days, at the outside, the truth must be known. So whatever you decide to do, do quickly. If you strike, strike your hardest. Your friend, the Graf.”

I was stupefied into stone. Outside, the winter sun was shining ; I could hear, as it were far off, the hum of voices, the merry tinkle of sleigh-bells in the frosty air ; and here was a man who had died knowing the awful truth that under the feet of the innocent at Polenstjerna lay treason, infamy, and ruin. Those Swedes chattering out there in the streets knew that at any moment news might be proclaimed that Swede and Brunswicker had crossed swords and were at push of pike in the trenches with the Dane. But

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this—this—this—no one dreamed of it. And yet the room where I sat rang with the word “ Riga ! ”

To-day was the ninth of March ; Riga had been attacked on the ninth of February. They did not know ; how long would it be, ah ! God ! how long would it be, before the news that Riga had been attacked in time of peace was spreading like flame over Stockholm ?

“ Save the Fröken Countess and the Polenstjernas ! ” So I had glibly promised. But it was impossible ; for this foul conspiracy against a friend and an ally had undone them, and Sweden, and me—I stretched out my arms and sobbed—it was this which lurked behind the bloodshot eyes of his Excellency ; this was why Saxon troops had marched in the dead of night through the streets of Dresden ; this was why the Fru Countess had cozened me with her lies and branded me as a spy before my mistress. Ah ! dear God ! that men's and women's hearts should be so at the mercy of the Devil who reigns in hell and on earth.

Save my Lady ? save the pure and innocent who believed me vile ? Save my Lord Bengt, whose sword was red with a cousin's blood ? Save the Fru Countess who forged to gratify her accursed ambition ? I could not do it. Sweden was doomed. Her enemies were too many and too hard for her. Let Sweden perish, let the Polenstjernas reap the fruits of a woman's ambition, the first fruits of which were garnered in the room in which I stood. There was no just God. Everywhere reigned iniquity ; all was lies—lies—lies ! “ Lies and Riga ! ” cried the room in its stillness.

But I had promised the dead I would save them. Poor Karl lay at my elbow, his young face now at peace, his fair hair curling on his forehead. It might have been my Lady's face, so pure and innocent and proud ; and there leaped into the vision of my mind the sunlit Terrace at Polenstjerna, as I had seen it in far-off days, rosy with the dappled dawn climbing triumphant from the summer sea, where my Lady had given me a flower from the posy at her breast, and the



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fragrant salt of the Baltic had made her maiden's eyes bright with the divinity of girlhood.

I would save her!—my soul went out in a great cry—I would. They—his Excellency, and Reinhold Patkul, and the Czar, and all the false legions of hell—should not prevail. I had taught her, and she had taught me to love her, to love her race, her land, her king. For the sake of the righteousness of God, the Protestant Faith, and Sweden—“*Pro Deo! Pro Fide! et Pro Suecia!*”—let me strike one blow and then perish, if need be. O God! Thine eyes are upon the truth and shall not Thy truth conquer Satan and his lies?

I knelt down and prayed; when I arose, a desperate, a mighty idea flashed into my mind. It grew; it mastered me. I thrust it away as too cruel, hopeless, impossible. And then I read a third time what the Graf had written, line upon line, swaying with fears and doubts.

Yes, I would do it. My mind was made up. I tore the letter to pieces. I closed the shutters and called softly. The surgeon and the servant came swiftly. There was no need to speak. My face told the message.

The Herr Grefve Karl Polenstjerna was dead.

“I will do everything that is necessary,” I said, and the surgeon bowed and departed.

I gave orders for my Lord's sleigh to be made ready with the utmost speed, and while they were busy I ate and drank and meditated on what I was to say, and how to say it.

The sleigh was ready. They gave me Karl's rich fur cloak.

“Drive,” I ordered, “to the King's House on the Riddarholm.”

Both servants stared in breathless amazement.

“Drive at once,” I repeated, sharply. “There is no time to lose.”



CHAPTER XX

KUNGSÖR AND RIGA

THE King's House had a deserted look. With a sinking heart I sought the Captain of the Guard. "I must see his Majesty," I said, earnestly.

"You desire an audience," the Herr Captain said, with grave sarcasm. "We all, my dear sir, want an audience, but—it is quite impossible."

"I have news," I said, feverishly, "of the utmost importance, the extremest importance."

"I dare say," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh! sir," I pleaded, "if you could let me see his Majesty or one of his Majesty's Ministers for five minutes —"

"You are not a Swede," he interrupted, calmly; "are you from Holstein?"

"No, I am an Englishman, and it is more important than if I came from Copenhagen."

"If you came from heaven," he answered, lightly, you could not see the King here to-day."

"His Majesty is not in Stockholm?"

"That is so." He looked regretfully at the guard-room fire. A game of cards and the bottle were infinitely more entertaining than English madmen.

"Tell me where his Majesty is," I pleaded, breathlessly.

"You had better go to Kungsör," he answered, laughing.

"Kungsör! where is that?"

"It is a little castle of his late Majesty near Arboga at the other end of the Mälar, a trifle, maybe, of fourteen or fifteen miles."

Fifteen Swedish miles! eighty or ninety in our English reckoning! But it could be done; it must.

"Are you sure his Majesty is there?" I inquired.

"*Allmäktiga Gud!*" he exclaimed. "Is anyone sure where his Majesty will be? He has gone to Kungsör, that is all I know, and if you make haste you will be in time for the fun. A pleasant journey to you! What! you are really going?" he interrupted, in the greatest surprise, as I turned away.

"Yes. See his Majesty I must."

His eyes wandered over my rich fur cloak. I suppose, too, I carried in my face no few traces of a sleepless night spent in the saddle, of the tragedy that was the fruits of a woman's ambition. "Is it bad news?" he asked in an altered voice.

"You will know before long," I replied, slowly, "and may God grant you will not find it too late! I have the honour, sir, to wish you good day."

I left him smitten into silence. I do not think he found the fire or the cards or the *brännvinn* very comforting for the rest of that day.

"We are going to Kungsör," I said to the servant. The man nodded. He loved his dead master, as all who had felt the sunny nobility of his presence did; and he thought I was hurrying to the King to demand vengeance and punishment. It was just after two o'clock; we could do six miles this afternoon and the rest to-morrow. On the tenth of March I should be with the King.

I lay back in my furs—Karl's furs. God knows I was weary, but if a human will and three of God's noblest animals could do it we should beat the Devil in this race with the news from Riga. I slept. Men, I have read, have slept on the rack, and I had always believed it was a chronicler's

fable. But it is no fable. If I could sleep on the way to Kungsör, men could sleep on the rack.

Happily the frost still held ; and that night, late, we reached Strengnäs, about half-way. To my joy, at the hostelry they assured me the King was at Kungsör, hunting bears with his cousin, the Duke ; to-morrow was to be a memorable day with a splendid feast in the evening ; the country folk were flocking from all parts to join in the revelries. The news had not outstripped me. Even his Majesty could not hunt bears if he had learned that Riga, one of the glorious trophies of the great Gustavus Adolphus, the key of Livonia, had been treacherously attacked in time of peace, and was probably now in the hands of Pole and Saxon. Bears ! Poor boy King ! Before long he would be at bay himself.

Karl's money secured for me the only horses which the landlord had ; but they would not be fit to travel till morning. I must wait, having persuaded the landlord to swear that if a post came from Stockholm in the night not even the King's messenger should have them without my knowledge. I went to bed happy. If the fateful news overtook me, I could and would go with it. Yes, I slept.

No post came. Next morning—the morning of the tenth of March, a day that will never be forgotten in Sweden—I was pressing on relentlessly, no longer tired, but vigorous and determined. Fortune was on my side in this strange race. My Lord Bengt, baffled, had doubtless sped to Polenstjerna, only to discover that another bird had flown, and now sixty miles at least lay between us.

With every mile I grew more triumphant. The game was in my hands, and if I could perform what I meditated, it might be my Lord Bengt, and not I, who must clear a tarnished name and honour. Of the perils of the future, of that blood-stained sword, guided by the coolest, deepest head in Sweden, I refused to think.

By eight o'clock I was dismounting at the little inn in the



hamlet of Kungsör. The landlord at Strengnäs had predicted truly. Kungsör was in revelry, and a mighty hunters' feast was being celebrated at the King's castle. His Majesty, the Duke, and his Court had slain bears, great bears, and all the countryside had hasted to eat, drink, and be merry, to dance and sing and rejoice over the bears, slain not by gun or spear, but by bludgeons. It was amazing, incredible, yet such had been his Majesty's whim; his Majesty was his Majesty and must be obeyed. The hour had come to forget the madness and to make the rafters ring with the triumph over bears slain as bears had never been slain before. Revelry flared in Kungsör. Young men and maidens, old men and mothers, drinking and feasting with their boy King, and Karl lay dead in Stockholm, treason was hid in the hall of Polenstjerna, and the Flag of the Three Crowns had been displaced at Riga by the White Eagle of Augustus the Strong. Kungsör and Riga!

I crossed the stream and approached the castle, unnoticed; everyone was already at the revelry; the blare of trumpets and the glare of the bonfires might have been seen or heard for miles.

I lingered in the dark, torn with doubt. Someone was coming towards me from the inn, a gentleman hurrying to join in the fun and dance with the peasant girls.

"Sir," I said, with an effort.

"M. Martin!" he exclaimed. We both reeled back. Great heavens, it was my Lord Bengt!

"You!" he muttered, "you at Kungsör! You have followed me here?" he inquired, presently, in a gentler tone. "You have news of the Graf?"

My Lord had never been at Polenstjerna at all, but had come straight to be beside the King when and if the trouble broke. "No," I said, "I have no news of the Graf."

"Then," he began, bewildered, "what—?"

"I have news for his Majesty, Herr Grefve," I said, *quietly*.

Dead silence. The roar of the revelry, the pæan of wild music shook the darkness.

"News for his Majesty!" he repeated, dully.

"Yes, I have travelled from Stockholm with a message from your cousin, the Herr Grefve Karl."

A ghostly shiver ran through him. His hand crept to his sword-hilt.

"Your cousin is dead," I added, sternly.

"God!" he muttered, as if he had been stabbed. Silence, deep silence once more. "Ah!"—he growled like a wounded beast—"ah! you have lied to me, M. Martin."

I leaped back, for I thought he would have sprung at me. "No, Herr Grefve," I answered, "it is you who have lied to me."

My audacity cowed him, yes, cowed my Lord Bengt. He stood staring, his hands quivering.

"I have news for the King," I said, "and see him I will."

"And supposing I prevent you from seeing him?" he demanded, contemptuously.

"Herr Grefve, you cannot."

"Cannot?" he repeated with a passionless mocking.

"I beg your pardon. You can run me through without my foot slipping," He blenched. "But that will not prevent his Majesty from hanging you, Herr Grefve, and the Fröken Grefvinna, your cousin."

Silence once more. Through the darkness, and through and above the revelry rose the happy songs and laughter of girls, peasant girls singing and laughing as they danced with their lovers in youth's triumph for a royal victory.

"Think twice, M. Martin," said my Lord, calmly. "Do not meddle with what does not concern you."

"I have thought of that more than twice," I replied, stiffly.

"I have no quarrel with you," he pursued, gently. "Go your way. But if you persist, I warn you, you will be crushed. There will be no mercy."

"I neither hope for, nor expect any."

"You would see the King," he rejoined, quickly ; "then by God ! you shall ! We will see him together."

I was amazed. What did this mean ?

"You can take my sword, if that is what you fear," said my Lord, with a great scorn. "This is the way, M. Martin."

I followed him, dazed, as he led me swiftly into the court and through it. There were bears in it, alive and dead. Men and women, youths, girls, and children were drinking, laughing, shouting, dancing, singing. The snow had been cleared away ; a huge fire blazed in the centre of the court ; torches flared. In the hall to the boisterous music of trumpet and violin they were dancing, peasant girls with happy, flushed cheeks and laughing eyes of love, dancing in striped petticoats and bodices gay with ribbons, blue, red, and yellow, their caps set saucily awry at the quality who were dancing with them. The bears were dead, the hunters were come home ; let the wenches welcome the brave with song and dance and laughter ; aye ! let the rafters ring ! And Karl was dead at Stockholm, and treason lurked behind the sad eyes of the White Countess, and see ! yonder the Eagle of Augustus the Strong towers above the Three Crowns of the Vasa at Riga !

My Lord stopped in the doorway of the small room to which he had brought me ; his face was pale and worn ; he, too, had trodden the winepress of God and trodden it, like myself, alone.

"You persist ?" he asked, with a strangely gentle pity.

For a moment the music and the laughter, the ordeal awaiting me, shook my courage. The room was cruelly hot. I undid the clasp of my cloak and wiped the sweat from my brow.

"Yes," I said, at last.

He closed the door with calm decision. I was left to the torture of the revelry without.

The door opened again. It seemed as if it had just been closed ; it seemed to have been shut millions of years. His Majesty was on the threshold, and two gentlemen were with him, Counts Piper and Hermelin, and behind them my Lord.

I dropped on my knee, but the King took no notice ; he walked into the middle of the room and stood looking at me. They all looked at me. It was the King and yet it was not the King ; he was so different in his long wig, deep lace frill and neckerchief, and flushed, boyish cheeks ; and he held a great dog by the collar. But his mouth was as resolute, his eyes as inscrutable as when I had seen him in front of the soldiers, or striding, choked with dust, through the gallery to receive an envoy. A sudden frost chilled the room that had been so hot.

“ This,” said my Lord, gravely, “ is the man who says that he has news for your Majesty.”

“ Sire,” I began, and was stifled by the bleak coldness of those blue eyes. Piper was whispering to Hermelin. Like the Captain of the Guard they both saw a madman. But Bengt was all attention.

“ Sire,” I started again, and the words rushed forth, “ I have learned that on the ninth of February last a treacherous attack was made by the troops of the King of Poland on your Majesty’s city of Riga, and I fear the city has been taken.”

Bengt had stepped back involuntarily. Fear unspeakable was in his eyes. Hermelin and Piper glared at each other. Their faces were white ; their lips moved, but they said nothing. His Majesty alone had not moved a muscle.

“ It is impossible,” he said, to the ceiling.

“ Sire, I regret to say it is the truth.”

His Majesty flashed one look, and laid his hand on the collar of the great dog. “ We will go back,” he said, turning round.

“ Pray, how did you learn this ? ” Piper asked, dryly.

“ That,” I replied, “ I cannot tell you.”

"Some months ago," Bengt interposed, quietly, "M. Martin returned from Dresden."

"You have recently been in Dresden?" Hermelin broke in, anxiously.

"I left Dresden in October, your Excellency."

His Majesty had reached the door. The great dog scratched at it impatiently and whined.

"I suggest," my Lord said, deferentially, "that M. Martin be detained for inquiries."

Hermelin whispered with Piper. They had forgotten the King.

"Open the door," said his Majesty coldly.

"Sire," I pleaded, in wild despair.

"Open the door," repeated the King. Hermelin rushed to do so ; the great dog gave a bark ; the door was opened from without ; a messenger with snow on his clothes stood there, whose stupefaction at confronting the King was as immense as was the King's amusement at seeing him. The messenger snatched at his cap and dropped on his knee.

"Despatches, sire," he stammered, "despatches from the Herr Grefve Oxenstjerna."

"From the Chancellor!" exclaimed Bengt, Hermelin, and Piper together. The great dog bounded at the messenger and put his paws on his shoulders with excited barks.

The King was staring into vacancy. "Read them," he said, indifferently to Piper, and stood gazing in front of him.

Piper tore the despatches open. "*Allmäktiga Gud!*" he exclaimed, aghast. Then he waved the messenger away and the man fled with a scared face.

"Sire," he faltered, with bloodless lips, "sire, the man, the gentleman has—told the truth. The King of Poland has attacked Riga."

Bengt sprang forward, and checked himself. I felt the blood storm into my cheeks. "It is impossible," the King said, to the closed door.

"I fear not, sire. The Chancellor encloses a despatch

from the Governor, Count Dahlberg. The Kobrun *schantzes* were stormed and Riga bombarded. The city was in the gravest peril. That was on the ninth of February." The King fixed his eyes on me. "The Chancellor fears that by now it must have fallen." Piper involuntarily crushed the papers in his trembling fingers.

"What!" King Charles had wheeled round with a blaze of such anger and righteous indignation in those inscrutable blue eyes that we all trembled.

Piper handed him the papers, and his Majesty read them slowly. The colour died out of his flushed, boyish cheeks; he stood with the paper in his hand, gazing, as it were, into the future. The laughter and the music without continued, and there rang through this small, hushed room a joyous challenge of the revelling trumpets.

At last the King broke the silence, speaking with the measured solemnity of a judge. "It is wonderful," were his words, "that both my cousins will have war. Then so let it be. King Augustus has broken his pledge, and violated his treaty with us. We have a just cause. God will surely help us. I will first finish my business with the one; then I shall be free to speak with the other."

We listened spellbound. Words not to be forgotten by those who heard them, prophetic words which burned themselves into the memory of the Swedish people—words which were the appeal of a king to the tribunal of Him whose eyes are upon the truth, in whose rule and governance are the hearts of kings and the destinies of nations.

For a long time we stood awed. The sounds of revelry were beginning to flicker and fade. By degrees those present remembered they were here to listen to a madman who had spoken the truth.

"Where and when did you obtain this information?" Piper demanded, harshly.

"Yesterday. I went at once to the King at Stockholm, and I travelled night and day to bring it to his Majesty."

"How did you learn it?"

"That, your Excellency, I cannot tell you."

"And what reward do you expect?"

"I expect no reward," I said, proudly, "save that of being heard further."

"Well, sir," said the King, sharply.

"Sire," I answered, slowly, "I regret to inform you that I believe the attack on Riga may be followed by something worse—a conspiracy in Sweden."

Hermelin put his hand to his throat as if he choked. Bengt's hand crept to his sword-hilt.

"A conspiracy," inquired the King, unmoved, "of whom?"

"I cannot tell. But—I believe—there are papers—at Polenstjerna Castle."

"This is infamous!" burst out Bengt.

"Proceed," commanded the King, without the flicker of an eyelid, as if we were alone.

"I am prepared to find those papers," I said; "your Majesty can then judge."

The King had fallen into a brooding fit. Hermelin and Piper conversed in excited whispers. My Lord gazed at me, devouring interest in his passionless gaze.

"Sire," he began, very calmly, "before this *gentleman* proceeds with his slanders I take leave to say that two days ago he was dismissed from his position as tutor to my cousin, the Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna, having been convicted of bringing a lying charge against my aunt and having admitted he returned to Sweden at the request of the Graf von Flemming."

The King looked up, but he might have been thinking of the moon.

"What the Herr Grefve says," I answered, hastily, "is true. I was dismissed at the request of his cousin, Count Karl. Yesterday, on his death-bed, Count Karl asked my forgiveness."

The King stared at the wall through my body. But the consternation of Hermelin and Piper was tremendous.

"Are we to understand," Piper asked, at last, "that Count Karl is dead?"

It was Bengt who answered. "My cousin," he said, "yesterday quarrelled with me on a private family matter. We crossed swords. We have M. Martin's word that he is dead, and that he forgave him. But I am prepared to swear on my honour that when my cousin and I parted he showed no sign of changing his mind with regard to M. Martin's conduct, nor do we know what passed between them after I left Stockholm. I put myself in your hands, sire, and I demand an inquiry."

His air of unaffected dignity was superb—the dignity of one who bore an honoured name not unworthily. It thrilled Counts Hermelin and Piper, and it thrilled me with fear, and admiration,—fear above all.

The King remained obstinately silent.

"You must be aware, sir," Piper said, in frigid embarrassment, "that your charge is a grave one. You profess to have information——"

"Pardon," I interrupted. "Part of what I profess has already proved to be true."

The minister rubbed his chin in perplexity. "You bring," he said, somewhat lamely, "a serious charge against the Grefve Polenstjerna——"

"I have not mentioned Count Bengt's name," I said, quickly.

"You must, at least, tell us how you came by this information," he said, peevishly.

"That," I answered, firmly, "I absolutely decline to do."

Piper rubbed his chin again. He was beaten. And Hermelin began. "You will tell us," he said, coaxingly, "where these papers are?"

"That I can hardly do."

"Have you not seen them?"

"No." Hermelin threw up his hands in despair.

"And you expect his Majesty to believe you?"

"I have offered his Majesty my proofs."

"The man is mad," Hermelin said, pettishly.

"Perhaps," Bengt remarked, coolly. "But the matter is really very simple. M. Martin asserts he can find treasonable papers at Polenstjerna Castle. I humbly suggest to you, sire, that M. Martin's offer be accepted."

My Lord's face betrayed nought save injured innocence. What if the papers had been made away with? The thought caused me to drip with perspiration. Yet I could not draw back now.

The King looked up. "You assert, sir," he said, "that you can find these papers?"

"Yes, sire."

"*Then go and fetch them.*" I stared, for he spoke as if they were in the next room, not a hundred miles away.

"You will bring them to Stockholm," commanded the King, with a chilling royalty, "within four days or," in a terribly impassive tone, "answer for them with your life."

I bowed. "May I ask for one thing, sire," I said, "your written authority to enter Polenstjerna Castle?"

My Lord smiled grimly, a smile not lost on Counts Piper and Hermelin.

"Paper and ink," ordered his Majesty, laconically.

When they had been brought he scrawled a few lines, adding his signature. "Let a sleigh be made ready at once," he said, sharply. "Two of the Trabants will accompany M. Martin."

Count Piper had been growing more and more impatient. "Your Majesty," he inquired, "shall I not travel with the gentleman?"

"It is not necessary," the King replied, quickly. "I cannot spare you."

I breathed again. My Lord was watching me closely,

seeking, I felt sure, the thirst of vengeance in my face, and I endeavoured to satisfy him.

The King gave me one penetrating look up and down and through, then laid his hand on the collar of the great dog and strode swiftly from the room. He was gone and I dare swear not a man of us knew what was in his mind.

Counts Piper and Hermelin whispered for some minutes, bowed to Bengt, and followed their master. My Lord lingered.

"Good night, M. Martin," he said, with a finished courtesy; "I wish you a happy journey and a happier discovery."

And then he, too, left me. Time would show which of us had the better right to be confident and calm.

A few dying sounds of revelry mocked the silence, wrestling with the ominous hush which stifled them, as the glow of a fire wrestles with the relentless might of water thrown upon it. The most difficult part of my task still remained, and it depended on two women whether I could perform it—on two women and the spirit of one man, yeoman born.

I knelt and prayed for strength and courage.

Rising from my knees I saw a Trabant in the doorway watching me.

"The sleigh is ready," he said, as if he were accustomed to the sight of men on their knees at all hours.

We went down together in silence into the courtyard. The lights were gone; the peasant girls were gone; the quality was gone; all that was left of the revelry was two dead bears.

Riga had conquered Kungsör.





CHAPTER XXI

IN THE COMPANY OF THE POLENSTJERNAS

"SEE," said one of the Trabants, "yonder is Polenstjerna Castle."

I rubbed my eyes. It was, I reckoned, about ten o'clock at night, and for the last twenty-four hours we had travelled remorselessly, as men travel who live with King Charles, hasting as if life and death hung on our track,—and they did.

No sound but the sharp tinkle of our bells broke the frosty air; but yonder, into the star-spangled blue-black vault of heaven shot the gaunt, colossal towers of Polenstjerna, their copper domes gleaming out beneath their mantle of snow. Scarcely a single light twinkled red; the battle-mented pile hung between sky and earth, dim, vast, and spectral as the Palace of the Spirits of the Night.

We passed postern and drawbridge; at the sound of our imperious horn Axel strutted forth, pinching himself to exorcise the sleep from his brain. Greta, too, had already stolen in, a shawl over her head, and, numbed with piteous terror, stood staring at the Trabants. Surely the Dane had landed at last and was ravishing and burning.

"You will go," I ordered her, "to the Fru Countess and tell her that I must see her at once."

"*Herre Gud!*" she murmured, letting the shawl fall. "The Fru Countess has gone to bed." Was I daft that I, M. Martin, the tutor, dared to send commands to Madam the Fru Countess?

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"You will say," I added, sharply, "that it is the business of the King, and that in his name I beg Madam to descend as soon as possible."

The wench gnawed at her shawl in speechless fear.

"You had better go," Axel whispered, his knees loosed by the sight of these haughty Trabants.

"And," I added, "when you have told the Fru Countess you will then give the same message to the Fröken Grefvinna. Now be off!"

I had thought it all out during the journey. My plan was complete; I requested the Trabants to remain in the lobby and then I bade Axel bring lights to the great hall. There was something I must know at once, or I really should go mad.

Once alone, I sprang at the portrait of the White Countess—and drew back in awe. The woman in the picture surveyed me with such a royal disdain and dignity that for five breathless, choking minutes I cowered before her. Dared I touch? Dared I defy the curse? Covering my eyes with one hand I thrust the other between the picture and the wall. God! a thin, long case hanging on a nail struck my groping fingers. Sobbing with fright and joy, I wrenched it open. One glance was enough. The Graf had told the truth, the damnable truth!

I put the case back, and tottered to a seat by the hearth. I was chilled to the bone with a deadly cold, and I heaped on logs till the fire roared in the chimney. No need now to recall the half-dozen schemes which had reeled through my mind to be adopted should the papers not be where the Graf had said. Once again I knelt and prayed that strength would be given me.

And my prayer was granted. When I arose I was not alone; the torches flared, the fire blazed and roared, but above the flare and the blaze ruled a serener, purer, and diviner light. Never had this superb hall looked so ineffably worthy of the stainless Polenstjernas, generation upon

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generation of men and women, each breathing an immortal pride in their race and their land; aye, indeed! theirs would be our company to-night; in their presence must the tale of shame and infamy be told. Around them and me in bullet-shattered drum and bloody, dusty folds of tattered banners were piled the emblems of their honour and their glory—the honour and glory of the men who had risen with the star of the Vasa, when Sweden shook off the fetters of Christian the Tyrant and became a nation; of the women who had given their womanhood to the country of their birth because to the daughters of the Polenstjernas it was a privilege to show that Swedish women were the mothers and wives of Swedish men. Yonder hung that grim, faded, bearded warrior in his antique ruff who, as a boy, had fled from “The Blood Bath of Stockholm” to be hunted with the lad Gustavus Vasa from peasant’s cottage to peasant’s cottage, who had hailed the dawn of freedom, standing by Gustavus’s side when he appealed to the men of Delarue; and here, last of all, was my Lord, the friend and Counsellor of his late Majesty, who had sent me from The Hague to make his daughter fit to hand on, as his mother had done, to her sons the sacred torch of duty to the kings of Sweden and duty to the Polenstjernas; aye! all these—these men and women—would be, were, in our company to-night.

Grünback, Stångebrö, Wallhof, Breitenfeld, Lützen, the Crossing of the Belt, Warsaw, Lund—the landmarks that witnessed to two centuries of a nation’s travail, were they not also written in the chronicles of the House of Polenstjerna; were they not written in the faces of the men and women who would see and hear to-night? Above my head the flare of the torches caressed in a halo of flame the noble escutcheon and played with tongues of deathless fire around the scroll and its imperishable motto—“*Pro Deo! Pro Fide! et Pro Suecia!*”—Yes, the men and women in whose company we would stand to-night had lived and died “For God, the Protestant Faith, and Sweden!” And it had come

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to this at last. Oh ! shame, shame on a dishonoured and ruined house !

And I was here to face them, the Polenstjernas, because I believed that one, one only was free from stain, the mistress whom I had served, the girl whom I had taught, the woman whom I loved. Ah ! God, might it be so ! but perhaps the Graf had lied to save her and me, her from the scaffold, me from a broken heart. Her name and writing were in that accursed case ; they had all lied to me. It might be that she whom I loved was as the others fair and noble, false and guilty. For to this—to this I, too, had come.

Up and down I paced, with their eyes upon me, their spirit communing with mine. I was here not to save, but to learn the truth ; and in the presence of God whose eyes are upon the truth, in the presence of the Polenstjernas, in whose company we would stand to-night the truth should be laid bare.

Something swept through the air. With a shiver I turned—halted—drew breath. The Fru Countess stood before me. Such anger hardened her Polish pride as might have quelled any man but one who was here to learn the truth. I was filled with pity, not fear. She was a mother and a woman, and with me she must now reap the fruits of a mother's and a woman's ambition.

“Tell me,” she said, cutting my bow short, “by what right a dismissed servant breaks into this castle—one who has broken his oath ?”

“By the right, Madam,” I answered, “that the King of Sweden has given him.”

She refused to look at the paper which I offered her. “I can support,” I said, slowly, “the word of ‘a liar and a spy’ by two of his Majesty's Trabants.”

Behind her haughty rage sprang up the torture of a guilty conscience. Our eyes met ; hers dropped.

“His Majesty can do as he pleases,” she replied, stiffly, “but he cannot compel me to dance attendance on a

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dismissed servant," and she moved superbly towards the door.

"I ask you," I began, "not in the King's name, but in that of your son——"

The door had opened, and then we both started. Could it be that the White Countess had really come at last? Ah, no! it was only my Lady, all in white from the wrap about her shoulders to the robe which kissed the floor. Her golden hair, hastily fastened, her eyes, innocent and proud, might have been the hair and eyes in that haunting picture. How lovely, supremely lovely she was!

"Ebba," said Madam, harshly, "return to your room, I beg."

My Lady paused, looked from myself to her aunt and back to myself.

"Pardon me," I explained, "the business which has brought me hither by the command of his Majesty concerns the whole house of Polenstjerna, not least its head."

"Be brief," she commanded, waving me and my paper back, as if my presence would pollute her.

"His Majesty," I began at once, "has been informed——"

"By whom?" interrupted the Fru Countess; "by M. Martin?"

I clenched my fists. "Yes, Madam," I replied, with an effort, "by myself, that the King of Poland, in time of peace, has treacherously attacked the city of Riga."

My Lady paled. "It is not true!" exclaimed the Fru Countess, passionately.

"I was at Kungsör," I answered, coldly, "when the news was unhappily confirmed."

"Kungsör!" repeated the Fru Countess. Terror crept into her countenance.

"What has this to do with us?" demanded my Lady. Her eyes had never left my face.

"This, Madam, his Majesty has been informed that the

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attack on Riga is likely to be followed by a plot in Sweden, the papers of which are concealed in Polenstjerna Castle."

"Silence!" said my Lady, so fiercely that she drowned the sharp cry in Polish wrung from her aunt. "How dare you?"

"I have been commanded," I proceeded, relentlessly, "to search and find these papers."

My Lady, with a scorching look, put her hand on her aunt's arm. "Come, Madam," she said, "we will leave this man to carry out the King's commands."

But the Fru Countess was riveted to the spot. Her eyes were fixed on the portrait. I swiftly placed myself between them and the door.

"No," I said sternly, "the Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna will remain here."

"Take care!" my Lady answered, "take care! You have a command from his Majesty to find papers, you have no command to insult two unprotected women."

"The papers," I said, after a pause, "are in this hall."

My Lady turned her back on me. "The Graf—" had burst from the choking lips of her aunt. "The Graf——"

"The Graf?" questioned my Lady. Anger and fear suddenly swept across her face, as pitiless hail may sweep a garden of roses.

I looked at the Fru Countess. She had called me a liar and spy; she had lied and ruined me, but I would willingly have stopped now.

"No, Madam," I answered her, quietly, "you are mistaken. It was your son, not the Graf von Waldschlösschen, who has sent me to Polenstjerna."

"My son?" It was pitiful to see her courage revive.

"Your son," I said, "your son—who, it is my duty to tell you, is—dead."

"Ah!" It was my Lady's cry of horror. The Fru Countess put her hand to her heart. "Dead! dead!" she moaned, as we helped her to a chair. "Dead!"

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These were the fruits of a woman's ambition. A son, a beloved son, was dead, and with him had perished all the desires, all the hopes, for which a mother had forged and lied, which had made a mother's life sweet.

"It is not true!" she said, fiercely; "tell me it is not true!"

But I was silent.

"Have you no pity?" my Lady demanded. "Finish your work of revenge and leave us."

"It is not my work, Madam. If there is revenge, it is another's. My Lord Bengt——"

I was reeling. My Lady with a terrible thrust had hurled me from her. "You coward!" she cried, "begone before I order them——"

I looked her full in the face, then walked straight towards the portrait of the White Countess, and seized a chair.

"Ah!" With another choking cry the Fru Countess had risen. Her limbs gave way and she sank into the seat by the fire, covering her face with her hands.

I placed the chair in front of the picture in an awful silence.

"Do not touch it," forbade my Lady sternly. "You shall not!" She sprang forward to seize my sacrilegious arm. It was not necessary. Before I could even mount the chair or stretch out my fingers a tremendous crash paralysed her and me. The portrait suddenly swayed, and fell of its own accord, face downwards, on the floor.

"*Herre Jesus!*" sobbed my Lady. "*Herre Jesus!* have pity upon us!"

My blood ran cold. This was verily the hand of God. When the portrait of the White Countess should fall the ruin of the Polenstjernas would be nigh, and the time was here—here!

The case with the papers had been ripped from the wall, and lay open at my feet. I could not pick it up. My Lady's cry for pity had stabbed me to the heart. If the Graf had lied! If the Graf had lied!

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"Have mercy, M. Martin," wailed the Fru Countess, "have mercy!" She rocked herself to and fro in her seat, beside herself with guilty anguish.

I stared, helpless, at them both. The fear in my Lady's eyes was awful. Her body trembled, her lips moved. Then she suddenly turned with a terrible cry.

"Aunt!" she said, "woman, what have you done? What have you done?"

But the Fru Countess could only rock herself, with moans for mercy.

I seized the case. "Treason," I said, "treason is written here."

My Lady pressed a hand to her bosom, as if a sword had gone through her breast.

"Treason!" she repeated, wildly, "treason against the King of Sweden in the castle of my father! God help me! God help me!"

And God forgive me, too. I had said it to learn the truth. I who had taught her, who loved her, heard in a tumult of joyful pain the innocence which sharpened the exceeding bitterness of that cry.

"Yes, Countess, may God help you!" I muttered. "Look for yourself."

She took the papers from me—that petition for the cessation of the 'Reduction,' which contained an undertaking to compel his Majesty by force of arms, and that other agreement to procure full restoration of their rights to various persons, above all to Reinhold Patkul. They were signed by the Fru Countess, by my Lords Karl and Bengt, and to both were attached the signature and seal of the Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna.

Her eye fell on the writing of her two cousins, her own name and seal. She commenced to read furiously, and stopped as furiously. "It is a lie," she moaned, "a lie!" and the papers dropped on the floor.

Slowly, very slowly, the full horror of the infamy and ruin



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threatening her house broadened out. Can I ever forget the dawn of the piteous agony mastering her senses, the agony of the helpless, the betrayed, the God-forsaken, which crushed her as the avalanche of the Devil's lies crushes. Ah! did I not know what the betrayed and the God-forsaken can endure?

"Before God, I am innocent," she sobbed, "I am innocent, I swear it. Have mercy, M. Martin, have mercy." She fell on her knees, her head bowed; her golden hair trailed in the dust.

To this, in the company of the Polenstjernas, in whose presence we stood to-night—to this we had come. For this, too, was the fruits of a woman's ambition.

"Was it Bengt who killed my son?" asked the Fru Countess, stung by a sudden thought.

"They fought, Madam. I came too late. Your son was wounded, and he died."

Her hands dropped; she stared through the hall. "Bengt, Bengt!" she repeated, "then we are undone, we are indeed undone."

Nothing but shame and ruin remained to send her grey hairs with sorrow to the scaffold. Karl, her son, was dead—she laughed, laughed shrilly. Ruin! what did ruin signify? Shame! what did shame? She laughed. Nothing could matter now.

And we, my Lady and I and the Polenstjernas, in whose company we were, had to stand helpless and hear a sonless mother laugh.

My Lady had risen; she pushed back her hair till it flooded her shoulders; she raised her head. For her, too, nothing but ruin remained, but she would face dishonour as a Polenstjerna who was innocent should. "Take the papers," she said, wearily, "and leave us, M. Martin. You have had your revenge."

I took the papers. "Before I leave, Countess," I said, "I still have a duty to perform. I was at the bedside of

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your cousin when he died. Your name was the last on his lips, and he sent you this."

Only the locket of the White Countess, whose picture lay on its face at our feet, the locket stained with the blood of a Polenstjerna shed by a Polenstjerna. It was one of those minutes in a woman's life when no words, no tears, neither crying, can pluck from the heart its burden of sorrow.

"Count Karl asked my forgiveness," I added, "and he died forgiving and forgiven——"

The Fru Countess stumbled to her feet and laughed, while her fingers dabbled in her grey hair; a shiver, a divine thrill of justice stole into my Lady's cheek.

"His last request," I went on, "was that I should save you, Madam, his mother, and you, the Fröken Grefvinna."

The Fru Countess ceased her laughing; she stretched out her hands, imploring hands. She did not know, poor woman, what she did.

"And," I said, very slowly, "I am come to fulfil the request of a dead man."

Silence. The Fru Countess waved her imploring hands, babbling in piteous Polish.

"I am here also to do justice," I cried, my passion rising, "and to know the truth. Fröken Grefvinna, I have taught you, I have been in your service. God forgive me if I thought you were guilty; I have fought with that temptation of the Devil, and I know—you are innocent——"

"M. Martin!" It was the cry I had come to hear—the cry of the woman whom I loved.

"And it is because, Madam, you are innocent, that you, my mistress, and your house shall be saved."

The Fru Countess continued her babbling; my Lady drew a deep breath of pain. I seized the papers. "There is but one way," I said, hoarsely. "Oh! Madam, M. Martin, who has been called a liar and a spy; who is as innocent as you are; M. Martin, who is grateful that you have taught him his duty to the King of Sweden, will have his revenge——"

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My Lady was crying ; her aunt wrung her hands ; that awful, lisping babble of Polish suddenly ceased : she stared with vacant eyes ; yes, revenge, if I desired it, was mine.

“ A liar and spy,” I said, “ who has promised a dying man, can save you and will—” and I flung the cursed documents into the flames. In three minutes all proofs of the treason of the Polenstjernas were swallowed up. God of His exceeding goodness had granted to me, who loved the Fröken Grefvinna, to do this righteous deed.

“ What have you done, what have you done ? ” my Lady wailed in impotent anguish.

“ This,” I answered, proudly, “ this, my duty. There was a plot ; it had to be stopped. I went to the King and told him. He knows there was a plot: he does not know who had plotted. He sent me here to find the papers. I have found them. There will be no plot now. Thank God, Madam, on your knees that Sweden and your house are saved from that ! ”

The Fru Countess put forth her arms. “ Saved,” she babbled, “ saved—the papers—the papers—” she wailed, and swooned in her chair. She lay stiff and stark as one dead. He whose eyes are upon the truth had smitten her with a swift palsy. Body, soul, and spirit were broken.

Her eyes were eloquent of many things pleading for utterance, but these we could never know, for the Almighty in His awful justice had bereft her of speech. Greta and the other women stole in, and carried her away to linger a little and then to die in silence, not even able to ask forgiveness or to be forgiven. Such were the fruits of a woman’s ambition, and the fool and the wise have been found to say in their hearts, there is no God.

My Lady and I were alone. Alone—no ! for we stood in the company of the Polenstjernas. And she and I could look them in the face. Her honour, which was their honour, was free from stain.

She flung the white wrap from her neck ; she held out

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a timid, yearning hand. "Forgive me," she pleaded with a proud sob, "forgive me if you can!"

I raised her from her knees and in her place I knelt to kiss her hand. Words failed me.

And so in silence and in tears we wiped away the memory of that shameful day which had brought the bitterness of a lost faith into my life. The Devil did not wholly reign upon earth. I had not recovered my honour, but my Lady had given me back something more precious than my honour,—she had re-created in me my belief in womanhood, which she herself had well-nigh torn up by the roots. And with that belief the world was fair once more, and I would take what King Charles awarded with a light and happy heart.

"Tell me the truth," she asked presently.

But the truth was just what I could not tell. Let the dead bury their dead. To what purpose was it to rake in the shameful ashes of a shameful past; to lay bare the sin of the man who had paid the wages of sin with his life; of that most wretched mother, struck down in our presence by the righteous judgment of Him to whom vengeance belongs? Not to us must they answer for what they had done: not for me was it to reveal how they had sinned.

And so I told my mistress simply enough for her to understand, the peril in which her King, her country, and her house had stood. The rest, even my Lord Bengt's share, I passed by. I had saved her and I must needs also save him. That, too, was the fruits of a woman's ambition.

"I cannot think," she said quietly, when I had finished, "why you should have done it after our—my—my injustice to you."

"Madam," I ventured to reply, "I did it because to a man it sometimes happens that the life and honour of another are dearer than his own."

God knows I yearned to say more, but the yeoman born had learned his lesson.

She was the Grefvinna Polenstjerna, alone with me here

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in her sorrow, and I, her tutor, stood in the presence of her house. And what is love, or what, indeed, is service, if the man who loves cannot serve in silence, pride, and pity when the woman whom he loves is at his mercy ?

And my Lady thanked me by a swift dropping of her eyes. And that little look—that little look, so tender and true—that, to me who had trodden the winepress of God, was a richer reward than the yeoman born may deserve at the hands of a lady of gentle birth, whom, in his folly, he had presumed to love.

My errand was done. I begged her permission to retire.

“ Whither are you going ? ” she asked, earnestly.

“ To the King, Madam.”

“ You shall not ! ” she cried, putting a hand on my arm. “ They will kill you, and you—you shall not suffer for the sins— ” her voice broke.

“ I gave my word,” I answered, gently ; “ you, Countess, would not have me break it, my word to the King—the King of Sweden ! ”

She walked hastily to the door and stood with her back to it, barring the way. Ah ! In those dear eyes lay everything to intoxicate—admiration, repentance, remorse—but the one thing which would have made me perjure myself, gladly, was not there, alas ! could not be there.

“ My friend,” she said with a sweet majesty, “ if you were my brother, I would be prouder of you than of any man in the world ; as your pupil, I ask you to return to the King and tell him the truth, the whole truth. God has been good to you. Do not fear. Bengt, with God’s help, shall and will save you.”

“ Bengt ! ” The bitter cry escaped me. She did not, could not believe him guilty. And it was I—I, who had made the belief a certainty.

“ Yes,” she answered, in happy confidence, “ Bengt.”

“ I will do my duty,” I answered. “ Let me pass, Madam.”

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"Promise," she implored ; "promise first."

I was about to yield. "Hark !" she suddenly exclaimed, snatching back her hand, "Hark ! what was that ?"

Voices, eager voices in the outer hall.

"Thank God !" my Lady sighed. "It is Bengt ; it is not too late."

The mockery of it, the unspeakable mockery of it !

A man strode in, snow on his cloak, snow on his boots, his face pale, sleepless, worn, but hard as steel.

Yes, it was my Lord Bengt.





CHAPTER XXII

IN THE PRESENCE OF THE KING

FOR two minutes we three confronted each other in a shamed silence, while my Lord's passionless, sleepless eyes, in which fear and revenge slumbered, wandered over the hall,—the flaring torches, the fallen picture, my Lady in the magic witchery of her white robe,—and he was about to speak when the motto on the escutcheon—" *Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !* "—snatched the words from him. Yes, he too, now stood in the company of the Polenstjernas ; and he was guilty.

My Lady touched his arm. The flush of a girl's love and a girl's loveliness had fled ; her face was as white as her dress, and purified into a diviner beauty by the sorrow born of a woman's shame. " Thank God, Bengt," she said, softly, " you are not too late."

Her glance, her touch, her voice, were as the draught of strong wine. She loved him still ; he—he was not too late. What mattered it that he stood guilty in the presence of the Polenstjernas ? He still was master of his fate. " Yes, Ebba," he replied, kissing her hand with a tender devotion, " I am not too late."

And I was once more impotent.

" Bengt, Bengt," my Lady questioned, passionately, " why, why did you kill him ? "

My Lord gave me one look ; then he took his cousin's hand, and looked into her eyes. " Believe me, Ebba," he

answered her, oh ! so quietly, " I went to Stockholm to save him ; he would not listen ; he used hot words, words about you that stirred my blood. I was mad, desperate. His foot slipped. You must try to forgive me. Poor Karl ! if he had only seen, I was ready to give my right hand to save him."

And she, poor loving heart, listened with moist eyes, and believed. What else could she do ? Not even I believed that my Lord intended to kill him. But fate and the passion for one woman had been too much for him.

" You must try to forgive me," he repeated, contritely ; " I cannot forgive myself." His face grew hard. " And now, sir," he confronted me, " I desire to know what you have been pleased to tell the Countess Polenstjerna."

" For that," I said, " I answer to the Countess Polenstjerna and his Majesty, not to you, Herr Grefve."

" Indeed ! " he said, in icy anger. " Permit me to assure you your wish will soon be gratified. His Majesty will be here very shortly."

" His Majesty ! The King ! " my Lady and I exclaimed in one astounded breath.

" Yes," my Lord rejoined, smiling grimly, " I have outstripped the King by perhaps an hour, and before he arrives, if M. Martin has nothing to say to me, I have something to say to M. Martin."

The threat passed over me unheeded ; I could think only of that mysterious King whose heart no man could read, and that mysterious King would be here very soon.

" Ebba," he said, slowly, mastering himself, " I must know what M. Martin has told you."

" He has told me all," she began, in a stricken whisper.

" All ? " The reply made even that adamant will blench. But in a trice he had recovered. " Did he tell you," he demanded fiercely, " that he brought a lying charge against me in the presence of the King ? "

" Bengt ! " her bewildered protest stifled my angry contradiction.

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"Then he has not told you all. This gentleman asserted he could find treasonable papers in your castle. It is a lie."

Fate was on his side. In his ignorance or his cunning he had uttered the one fierce denial required to prove his innocence in his lover's sight. She bowed her head with a sob. "It is no lie, Bengt," she muttered. "M. Martin found the papers here—here at Polenstjerna."

"What!" He clutched at the nearest chair. "And you have seen them?"

"Yes, Bengt, I have seen them."

"Ah! God!" he sat down, overcome. And I who had saved him must witness the silence of guilt convince the woman whom he and I loved that he was as innocent as she was; see her lay a comforting arm on his to support him in the agony whose bitterness she had been the first to taste.

"What did they say? What was in them?" he asked hoarsely.

"All of us," she murmured, incoherently, "our aunt, Karl, I, Bengt, and you, you, too."

"It is a lie," he burst out, in despair, "a lie! You are innocent, Ebba, innocent, I swear."

If he had been acting before, he was not acting now. Face to face with ruin and dishonour, his first, his only thought was for the woman whom he loved and whom he had cruelly wronged. Ah! no wonder my Lady loved him.

"Yes," she answered, taking his hands, and looking up into his face in a proud and tender confidence, "God knows and you know, Bengt, I am innocent."

"Yes," he said softly, his fingers caressing her hair, "yes, Ebba, thank God! you are innocent."

She sobbed with joy. It was all she needed to make her happy. and he—her Bengt, whom she loved—had said it. Dear God! it was piteous.

"Ebba," he asked, tenderly, "you do not believe I am guilty?" and waited with caught breath, heaven and hell in his eyes.

"Bengt!" she protested, as if he had stabbed her.

Ah! the future had no terrors now. He could only repeat her name, and they stood hand in hand in a silence diviner than speech. They had forgotten in that supreme moment where they were—the past, the present, the future. But the hall was already chill with the presence of the hasting King. My Lord awoke, and revenge and anger swept their unhallowed lights across his face.

"Where did you find the papers, sir?" he demanded, imperiously.

"M. Martin," said my Lady, "found them behind the portrait of the White Countess. O Bengt! the picture has fallen—fallen. Ruin is on us."

"Not yet. Where are those forgeries now?"

"Herr Grefve, you are come too late," I said, coldly. "They are already destroyed."

"What! You destroyed them, you?" He snatched at my arm in incredulous wrath.

I bowed.

"It is impossible!" The contemptuous admiration with which a soldier rewards an act of mad and useless bravado curled his lip.

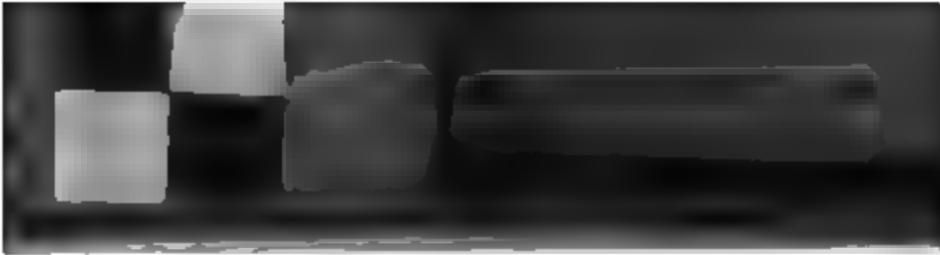
"Perhaps it is," I answered. "I came from Kungsör to destroy them and I have done it."

"You—" He sat down, and rubbed his forehead.

"You will believe me," I proceeded, stiffly, "when I add that I did not do it to save you, Herr Grefve; no, long ago you told me but three passions ruled a man's heart: love, ambition, and revenge. You forgot the fourth—gratitude. I burnt the papers because I was grateful to the Fröken Grefvinna, your cousin."

If I had laid a whip-lash across his face, I could not have maddened him more completely.

"And you, M. Martin," he said, with a sudden growl, "have forgotten the fifth passion, the desire for justice. I arrest you in the King's name."



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"Bengt!" My Lady had thrust herself between us. "Bengt!" she appealed.

"The Herr Grefve is right," I said, calmly. "I am here to answer his Majesty for what I have done."

"Never!" she answered, pushing her cousin back. "Never!"

Her pleading only hardened his resolution.

"You shall judge for yourself, Ebba," he answered, frigidly. "Let M. Martin explain how it is that he alone was aware of the existence——"

"I do not care," my Lady interrupted. "M. Martin has saved my honour at the cost of his own. He shall not suffer, he shall not——"

She laid pleading hands on him. He stood irresolute, and then with superb adroitness seized the chance. "You would save him?" he asked, tenderly.

"Yes, yes, but how, how?"

"There is not a moment to lose. We will hide him in King Eric's Tower."

She grasped at the suggestion eagerly, her eyes aflame. I stepped between them.

"And if," I said, "if I refuse to be hidden in King Eric's Tower?"

He understood and winced. "Ebba," he answered, quickly, "if you would save M. Martin, you must persuade him at once."

My Lady turned to me. But I shook my head.

"Do not be a fool," said my Lord; "at least put yourself in the keeping of my cousin."

Before I could answer, a trumpet rang out—rang out again. The King had arrived. It was too late. With despair we all three listened spellbound, to the bustle, the excited voices, the rush of feet, the sudden silence.

"Very good," my Lord whispered, in cool contempt; "your blood be upon your own head, M. Martin."

A blast of icy air swept into the hall; my Lady caught

up her mantle; even Bengt shivered. Half a dozen men, simple soldiers, were marching in, and at their head was King Charles. His Majesty halted sharply, with a royal ring of spurs. His blue eyes, mysterious, impenetrable, set in that boyish face, now worn and wrung with a nation's trouble, rested on my Lord and myself. He was acknowledging our reverence with a grave inclination of his head when my Lady floated into his vision. Off came his hat and he bowed to her deep curtsey with a simple and royal grace. For all that, her sex, her youth, her beauty, oppressed him. Did they not say truly that a woman, a young woman, a beautiful woman, always robbed King Charles of his ease? Strange that it should be so when women influenced him as much as an icicle might influence the sun at midday. Once again a King of Sweden and a Countess Ebba were standing where a King of Sweden and a Countess Ebba had stood seventy years ago. Was it not wonderful it should be so, as it was then and as it was to-day?

"What brings you here, Herr Grefve?" he demanded, abruptly.

"To protect my cousin, sire," was the ready answer, "and to ask for justice in the name of my house."

The King was lost in thought. For some minutes his gaze rested on the hem of my Lady's robe. "Fröken Grefvinna," he said at last, "I have business to perform in your castle, but—" he paused, as a monk of the woods might who met Diana and her nymphs a-Maying.

"I understand, sire," my Lady's clear young voice answered, "that your Majesty's business concerns the honour of my house. I ask permission to remain."

"As you please, Fröken Grefvinna," he replied, still obstinately staring at the hem of her robe, and fear rather than displeasure made his voice cold.

My Lady gathered her mantle about her shoulders, and retired to the farther end of the hall, where, save for the flickering shimmer of the torchlight on her hair, the folds

of her dress, and the locket on her breast, she was lost in the shadows. Infinitely relieved, the King dropped into a chair, opened his cloak absently, stretched out his legs, and plunged into silent meditation. It was amazing.

The soldiers stood by the door, standing stupidly and in shy fear at the hall; my Lord watched me and I watched the King.

His Majesty sat up, resolutely turning his back on that farther end of the hall. "Stand forward, M. Martin," he said, in a low tone.

I marched into the circle of light by the fire.

"You had," said his Majesty, "a duty to perform. Have you performed it?"

"I have searched," I answered, "but the papers of which I spoke do not exist."

Those inscrutable eyes dropped from my face, halted on the fallen portrait and the empty case lying between us. "You have searched?" the King asked, coldly.

"Sire, I have done my best."

"And —?"

"The papers do not exist."

His eyes very nearly wrested the truth from me; for the truth shone serenely in them. I stared at the spurs in his boots. I could not face his Majesty when he looked like that.

"Then you were lying at Kungsör," he said, calmly.

A sudden rustle, the clattering tinkle of bracelets falling sharply on a woman's wrists. Out there in the shadows my Lady had sprung to her feet.

"I was mistaken, your Majesty," I replied, setting my teeth.

A pause. My Lord Bengt, who had clenched his fists, slowly unclenched them.

"What do you mean?" his Majesty demanded.

"I was wrongly informed, sire, about the papers."

The King rose. "Herr Grefve," he said, "have you anything to say?"

"No, sire."

"Herr Grefve," the King answered in tones of the most royal and chilling authority, "I put M. Martin in your charge. Let the prisoner be removed till further orders."

He clapped on his hat and turned on his heel. A sweeping rustle of a woman's dress, and my Lady had glided between the King and the door. His Majesty removed his hat in swift impatience.

"Fröken Grefvinna," were his stiff words, "we ask your hospitality for our guard and ourselves till morning."

"My castle, sire," my Lady answered, with a deep reverence, "and all it has is at your Majesty's disposal." The mantle slipped to the ground. I saw her bosom heave. "But," she added, with an effort, "I ask permission to say something."

Half-frozen by a swift glance from those royal eyes, my Lord and I saw the King, with a slight inclination of his head, invite my Lady to speak.

"M. Martin," she said, very proudly, "has not told your Majesty all."

The King looked at the ceiling, at his boots. He would not look at her, nor would he speak.

"There were papers," my Lady blurted out, and then the full meaning of her words came home. She was about to accuse me of lying; herself, her cousin who was dead, her aunt who was dying, and the man whom she loved, of treason, and that in her father's hall in the presence of the Polenstjernas.

"Papers?" repeated the King. "Fröken Grefvinna, do you——" and he, too, stopped as if an avalanche of entirely new thought had burst and blocked the gates of speech.

My Lady did not flinch. "Sire," she commenced, earnestly, "your Majesty, I would——" She pressed her hand to her heart, breaking off in a sharp cry— "Ah! my God!" and she would have fallen at the King's feet had not Bengt and I caught her. The cruel strain of the last two

hours had at length done their work. Thank God ! for all of us, the Fröken Countess was a woman.

I forgot the King, forgot the soldiers. Before anyone could stir I had torn the door open. "Greta !" I shouted, "Greta !"

The wench was dozing in the lobby. "Quick," I whispered in her ear, "take the Fröken Grefvinna away, and tell her, 'Silence, silence !' "

In the hushed and crowded minutes I was conscious only of the Devil's comedy in the tragedy of human affairs, Greta's distress, and his Majesty's. The King had shrunk back, cowed, and helpless. Bears, men, and soldiers he could face and understand, but a young and beautiful woman who fainted at his feet, whose dress brushed the snow from his boots, reduced him to a distress almost comical. And poor Greta, half running, half dragged in by myself, plunged forward with a sobbing "*Herre Jesus !*" at the sight of her mistress lying in the chair in which my Lord had placed her, only to see the King between herself and the Fröken Grefvinna. Fear loosed her knees and she grovelled on the floor, a serving-wench not half so alarmed as the boy King, to whom she made her peasant's obeisance.

My Lord alone was perfectly master of himself. Wrenching Greta away from his stricken sovereign, he pushed her out at the door, then lifted my Lady in his arms and bore her swiftly away.

Left thus alone with the King, I observed in grim surprise how swiftly he recovered his frosty equanimity, now that there was no trace of a woman's presence to unman him. Sunk in a remorseless taciturnity he gazed at his prisoner, not with interest or with anger, but with a blank questioning which was empty of all human feeling. I was simply a puzzle, a problem to which he was striving to find the answer.

My Lord came back. The King looked up, picked his hat from the folds of my Lady's mantle, and strode to the door.

My Lord was just in time to open it, bowing low, and the pair disappeared. The clatter of the royal boots, the music of the royal spurs, slowly faded into the muffled distance of the gallery above the great staircase.

Nor did I recover the full use of my senses till I was alone in that accursed chamber in King Eric's Tower where all my troubles had begun.

Tramp, tramp, tramp ! It was the soldier on the flagged stones of the *Salle des Pas Perdus*—tramp, tramp, tramp ! up and down, down and up, this way and that. It was the weary knell which dinned into my weary ears that I was once more a prisoner, not of King Charles, but, as before, of my Lord Bengt.

Tramp, tramp, tramp ! Would it never stop ? How it racked my aching head and aching limbs ! I stretched myself in chill pain ; I started to my feet. I had fallen asleep with my head on the table. The lantern gently swaying beneath the portrait of the White Countess had burnt itself out ; the night was gone ; grey, grisly daylight, smelling of ice, and the sea, tainted with the savour of dead men's bones, was oozing in at the long loopholes. Another day of misery and impotence had been born. Tramp, tramp, tramp ! I was still a prisoner. I found a few pieces of wood and heaped them on the dying fire ; they crackled and sputtered ; a cheerful glow began to warm me as I knelt on the hearth. I stamped with my feet, I stood up, reading in the tiny flames the hideous story of the hideous night.

I had saved my Lady's honour, but herself I had not saved. Innocent, she believed a lie to be the truth ; for the future her life would rest upon a lie, and it was I, not my Lord Bengt, who had made it so. But God is not mocked ; man striking for the truth cannot win it by a lie. And I, who had thought myself so just and upright,—it was I who had done this thing.

Poor Karl was dead, and now there was no reason why my Lord Bengt should stoop to plot and counterplot ; my

Lady loved him ; there was no one to say him nay ; the sins of those who had barred his way had come upon them and they were gone to their account ; he, too, had sinned, but he alone had triumphed. Could a man have been in a bitterer position than mine ? Had I not done what I had done, my Lady had perished ; because I had done it my effort was shown to be useless. And I could not undo it now by telling the truth. My Lady would still believe a lie, her life would still rest upon a lie. It was too late—too late.

That was what I read crouching by the fire, and round me the ghosts of the past, of the men and women who had died in King Eric's Tower, of that recreant Swede who had hanged himself here because he had been guilty of treason, fleered and gibbered at me. The taint of dead men's bones hung in the air ; the moth-rotted tapestry flapped its unintelligible secrets into the icy gloom, and I, too, a prisoner, was going down into the darkness, dishonoured and having failed.

Pah ! the Graf had escaped ; why should not I ?

Stay ! a soldier was entering, bringing me food. Through the open door flashed the ruddy glow of a mighty fire in the *Salle des Pas Perdus*, the chatter and laughter of careless soldiers set a mocking chorus to the eternal tramp, tramp, tramp of the sentinel, which proclaimed I was a prisoner. I could have dashed the food in the man's face.

" I have never seen a man in prison," whispered a coaxing voice, " may I have just one peep, only one ? "

Greta, the baggage ! had brought my bread and beer. Greta !

Soldiers are human, more human than most, when a pretty wench stoops to entreaty. Of course she was permitted to peer round the grim door. Her fair hair, pink cheeks, and beribboned bodice shot a delicious sunlight into the chamber. She had stealthily laid a finger on her rosy lip.

" Greta," I said, boldly, " how is the Fröken Countess ? "

The wench had the impudence to fling the door from her,

and to drop me a curtsey, her roving eyes resting on the hapless guard. "Thank you, sir," she said, "the Fröken Grefvinna is quite well this morning."

She stood twiddling with the ribbons on her bodice and the ring on her finger. "Oh!" she cried with a gasp. The ring had been flung towards me. "Oh, my ring!" The guard looked at her, and she looked at the guard.

"Of course I must not go inside," she pouted, in great distress, "but perhaps you will. Now do, to oblige me, eh?"

What could the poor man do? Greta took his pike from him while he stooped, and in a trice she had whipped a piece of paper from the lacing of her bodice and with a saucy contempt coolly handed it to me over his bent back. The man rose, red in the face; but he was not so delightfully red as Greta, blushing the coyest of thanks.

"Will you not put it on?" she begged, and shook with naughty merriment as he fumbled over her fingers. "Oh! thank you," she cried, "thank you so much! and now you may help me down the steps." Raising her skirt, she bobbed to me, and, with the air of a princess, permitted herself to be led away.

"Girls are fools," was the next remark I heard through the studded oak, "but they are not such fools as *you* think." The peal of a maid's laughter, the guffaws of the soldiers round the watch-fire, the scud of pattering slippers on the stones, told their own tale.

"Girls are fools," I repeated, smiling, and added fervently, as the Graf had taught me, "God bless the men who are made their bubbles!"

On the scrap of paper was scribbled in my Lady's hand—"Courage! Trust my cousin." I kissed the writing. Only four words from a brave and innocent heart, but they warmed the room and made the hard black bread and the watery beer as the nectar and ambrosia of the immortal gods.

Escape! No! I would not escape now. Beyond the Salle

des Pas Perdus was working the deepest, coolest head in Sweden, and the woman whose honour I had saved was inspiring his efforts. I had something to live for—my own tarnished honour and the truth. And God whose eyes are upon the truth would in His own good time give me back my honour and reveal what was now hid.





CHAPTER XXIII

THE COOLEST, DEEPEST HEAD IN SWEDEN

AT midday I was informed that my presence was required in the great hall. As I crossed the accursed *Salle des Pas Perdus* and tasted the glorious sunlight and air, I simply felt a fierce determination to free myself somehow that I might complete the task which Karl on his death-bed had laid upon me.

A table was set in the hall, and at it sat his Majesty, my Lord Bengt, in the deepest mourning, and his Excellency Count Piper. His Majesty, as usual, took no notice of my salute, but it comforted me not a little that the Minister, and especially my Lord, most courteously acknowledged my reverence. Bengt's face was as calm and inscrutable as his Majesty's. Indeed, he might have been setting eyes on me for the first time, a strange contrast to that of Piper, who shuffled papers, gazing at me all the while with undisguised curiosity, not to say fear.

I was allowed ample time to collect my thoughts. The portrait of the White Countess had been taken away, but above my head the mighty Field Marshal, in a flood of sunny glory, soared to immortality in the arms of Fame and Love. His outstretched hand pointed unconsciously downwards to the gap on the wall where only yesterday his sister had stood to guard the honour of her race, and from that gap to the motto on his escutcheon—"Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !" The King's eyes, I observed,

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as mine, could not tear themselves away from that writing on the wall. It was Piper who broke the oppressive silence.

"Have the goodness," he said, stiffly, "to repeat what you informed his Majesty last night."

Ignorant of what had happened since, I could only do as I was bid—repeat my explanation.

"You have nothing to add to that statement now?" he demanded, scrutinising me closely.

"Nothing, your Excellency."

"You recall your assertion to the King at Kungsör?"

"Certainly."

"I presume, then, you admit having brought a most serious charge without any proof."

"I believed it to be true at the time," I said, "and I thought it my duty to lay before his Majesty all that I believed."

Piper looked at a paper. "How did you acquire that singular information?" he asked.

"I regret I cannot say. It is a matter between my conscience and myself."

Piper frowned. "In short, you refuse to tell his Majesty?" he said, sharply.

"I must refuse," I replied, quite calmly.

"Will you answer this—Did Count Karl inform you?" I reflected. My Lord leaned back in his chair, passed his hand yawningly over his mouth. He gently shook his head; his finger rested for a second on his lip. "I must decline to answer that too," I said, promptly, and my Lord just smiled, as he wrote on the paper before him.

"But," I added, "I think it my duty to say that Count Karl gave me a message to his mother, the Fru Countess, and to his cousin, the Fröken Grefvinna."

Piper rubbed his chin in perplexity. "What was the message?" he asked, eagerly.

"It was a family message," I replied, "and without the

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permission of the Fröken Grefvinna I do not feel at liberty to reveal it."

The King fixed his sharp eyes for a minute on me. My Lord smiled openly in enjoyment of the rebuff.

"And now, sir," Piper began, sternly, "what have you to say to the fact that the Fröken Grefvinna distinctly informed his Majesty that there were papers?"

My Lord closed his eyes listlessly, but the King was all attention. "It is not my place," I answered coldly, "to judge of what the Fröken Grefvinna thought fit to say. But I appeal to the Herr Grefve here whether I did not inform him on his arrival that the papers did not exist."

"That is so," said my Lord, with emphasis.

"But that is no answer," rejoined Piper. "What did you find before the Herr Grefve arrived?"

The King saved me by interrupting abruptly. "Let the Fröken Grefvinna be summoned," he said. His eyes were fixed on my face, and the chill sentence was the answer to a problem with which he wrestled heedless of what I was saying. In two minutes my Lord was escorting his cousin into the hall. It may have been my fancy, but I could have sworn some secret signal passed between them. My Lady, dressed in the plainest black, her face white as driven snow, saluted the King with a carriage as royal as his own; and I could have cried when she deigned to recognise with a touching simplicity my humble bow. She refused a chair and stood facing his Majesty, to his obvious and increasing embarrassment.

"Fröken Grefvinna," Piper began, for the King showed no sign of speaking, "we are sorry to bring you here in your great trouble, but——"

"A Polenstjerna," she interrupted, gently, "is always, I hope, at the service of the King of Sweden."

Piper bowed, and the King looked up hurriedly at the ceiling. "Do you recollect," the Minister asked, noting the act, "the events of last night?"

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"Do I recollect?" my Lady repeated, clasping her hands, and I could have thanked my Lord for the withering glance he gave Piper, the glance of the old noble at the new.

"Fröken Grefvinna," Piper demanded, "I must press you. Were any papers found by M. Martin?"

Dead silence. My Lord closed his eyes wearily. My Lady drew herself up. "Yes," she said, very distinctly. "Yes."

Piper smiled triumphantly. "And what was done with them?" he demanded, gently.

"M. Martin burnt them. He said my cousin who is dead asked him to do it."

Piper had not expected this. He rubbed his chin nervously. "Fröken Grefvinna," he asked, impressively, "on your allegiance what did those papers contain?"

My Lady's head went up. "They contained," she answered, "so far as I understood them, allusions to family matters. I saw only two, and those were not written by any member of my family. They were forgeries."

"I beg your pardon," said the astounded Piper.

"They were forgeries," replied my Lady haughtily. "One of them purported to have been written by myself. On my oath as a subject and on my honour as Grefvinna Polenstjerna, I had never seen it until M. Martin showed it to me. And that is the truth, as I stand before God and his Majesty."

Piper quailed; he could say nothing. The King folded his arms and dared to look first at my Lady and then at myself, mainly at myself, but he betrayed no desire to say anything.

"One more question, Countess," Piper asked at length: "Were those papers destroyed with your consent?"

"M. Martin did not ask my consent. He burnt them before I was aware of what he was doing. I repeat, he said my cousin who is dead asked him to do it. I thought he was wrong then, but I think he was right now, and," she looked Piper full in the face, "and I approve."

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"Thank you," said the still bewildered Minister. He turned to the King, who was studying the ceiling.

"And now, sir," he demanded of myself, "what have you to say?"

"Nothing, your Excellency."

"Nothing!" he repeated, and rapped angrily on the table.

My Lord rose and whispered to him. Piper threw up his hands pettishly, as who should say, "Do as you please."

"First of all," my Lord commenced, coolly, "I desire to say something myself. When M. Martin was dismissed from the service of the Fröken Grefvinna, I urged, as my cousin will tell you, that we should pardon him for the fault he had committed." My Lady bowed gravely, in confirmation of this. "We know now that my cousin who is dead, at whose demand this dismissal was carried out, regretted what he had done."

"So," interrupted Piper, dryly, "so M. Martin says."

"I believe M. Martin," said my Lady, sharply.

"And I, too," said my Lord. "Nay, for what I said in my anger at Kungsör I owe M. Martin an apology. I desire to withdraw it publicly, for I am convinced that M. Martin was acting from mistaken zeal both for his Majesty and my cousin, in whose service he had been."

Piper, not unnaturally, was more perplexed than ever. I was filled with the maddest of hopes.

"I should explain," my Lord proceeded, "that I arrested M. Martin because he had burnt the papers, as I understood."

"That is so," I said, calmly.

"Ah!" burst in Piper, "then M. Martin does admit that he found some papers."

My Lord turned indulgently to the Minister. "M. Martin," he said, with emphasis, "could not deny it, for he told me so himself on my arrival last night."

"But—" Piper began indignantly.

"Your Excellency," Bengt said, deferentially, "will perhaps permit me to question M. Martin on this very point."

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Were those papers," he demanded of myself, "what you expected to find when you informed his Majesty at Kungsör?"

"No," I said, promptly, "they were not." Piper rubbed his hands. We were coming to business at last. My Lord smiled.

"Was it my cousin who told you where to look?"

"I must decline to answer that," I said, after a short pause.

My Lord laid a triumphant hand on the table.

"And the message," he continued, "of which you spoke was connected with the papers?"

I reflected. "Partly," I said.

"Partly!" Piper interrupted, harshly.

My Lady, in response to a look from my Lord, stepped forward. "M. Martin means," she said, "the message to myself, which was of a very private character. I will tell his Majesty what it was, if his Majesty so desires."

The King moved his chin in a chilling refusal. My Lady went back to her place by the fire.

"On your honour," demanded my Lord, "did not the Fröken Grefvinna ask you to tell his Majesty what you had done?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you not do so?" My Lord's tone was severe, his mouth was smiling.

"I was afraid." Bengt leaned back, and shrugged his shoulders in scorn.

"In other words," Piper remarked, harshly, "you have revealed or concealed the truth as it suited your convenience," a comment to which I naturally made no reply.

My Lord looked significantly at the Minister, who addressed me in his most senatorial manner. "You must answer this," he said: "Did the papers which you burned mention the attack on Riga?"

"Not in a single syllable," I answered, promptly.

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"Fröken Grefvinna," Piper asked coldly, "you saw the papers : on your allegiance to his Majesty, is that so ?"

My Lady flashed her sympathy at my indignant face. "On my honour," she answered, "M. Martin tells the truth."

"Can you tell us," Piper proceeded, after a pause, "why the Herr Grefve Bengt quarrelled with Count Karl ?"

I hesitated. "Tell the truth, M. Martin," urged my Lord.

"Please, M. Martin," my Lady said, in a low voice, "tell the truth to his Majesty."

"Count Karl was not able to tell me," I said, "but I am sure his quarrel had something to do with the Fröken Grefvinna."

My Lady bowed her head. "Thank you," said my Lord, solemnly, "that is the truth."

But the ruthless Piper had not yet finished. "Fröken Grefvinna," he demanded, "what are your reasons for believing that M. Martin was wrongly dismissed ?"

"What he has done," was the simple answer. "He informed the King of what he had reason to believe was true ; he burnt some papers because he had promised, and because he did me the honour to accept my word that they were forgeries ; and he was ready to take upon himself the sole consequences of an act which could benefit himself in no way. If he were other than an honest man he would not have been so generous to those who had wronged him. Last night I asked his pardon ; I ask it again before you all. If to-morrow M. Martin would enter my service I should be prouder than if—" the tears choked her.

Piper was profoundly moved. The man who could have heard unmoved the nobility of that confession, spoken with a tender, remorseful pride by that noble girl standing beneath the motto of her race, had been no human being.

"One question more," Piper began. "M. Martin, have you any reason to believe that any more papers exist anywhere ?"

"No," I answered, "I neither know of any nor believe

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there are any." I paused to find words. "And," I added, with emotion, "I bitterly regret that I brought this charge against the Fröken Grefvinna and her castle; I readily confess I did wrong to burn the papers, and to conceal the fact from his Majesty."

Piper was silent at last. We all looked at the King, and the King was staring at the escutcheon above the chimney-piece.

"Will your Majesty," Piper asked, gravely, "be pleased to say what is to be done?"

The King waited fully three minutes, ignorant, I hope, of the torture he was inflicting. My Lord sat with folded arms, a satisfied smile on his thin lips. The inquiry that morning had been one long triumph for himself. Not without reason, indeed, had the Graf called him the coolest, deepest head in Sweden.

"Let M. Martin," said the King, suddenly, "be taken back to King Eric's Tower. Fröken Grefvinna, we beg you to remain here."

So back to the loathsome tower I was marched, and once again the tramp, tramp, tramp of the sentinel dulled my ears. I flung myself on the table, knowing only that I wanted to live, prayed to live, that I might fight for the truth. Time, existence, thoughts, joys, fears, miseries, were swallowed up in the benumbing stupor of that devouring desire.

Someone touched me. "Listen," said my Lord's voice.

I sprang up, and leaned against the wall, waiting.

"His Majesty," said my Lord, "has been pleased to set you free. You will leave Polenstjerna to-day, and if you ever return to Sweden or to the King's presence you will be treated as a lying knave for whom the gallows is too good. That is what I am commanded to inform you, and I only add that the words are not mine."

I laughed loud and long. Ha! ha! "A lying knave!" we should see.

"You have to thank," my Lord proceeded, gravely, "in

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the first place, your service in connection with Riga, but especially the Countess Ebba, who asked on her knees, as the daughter of her father, for the royal mercy."

"And you, Herr Grefve?" I stammered.

He understood the incoherent remark. "For myself," he answered, with cold politeness, "I have nothing to thank you for. But because you acted, very stupidly, I must confess, in the interests of my cousin the Fröken Grefvinna, I did at her request what I could to help you from difficulties of your own making. At Kungsör I thought you were a dangerous knave; I see now that you have been simply a rash young man. Let this be a lesson to you."

"I thank you," I said, "for the opportunity of becoming wiser."

"His Majesty," he continued, quietly, "has ordered an inquiry into the death of my cousin Karl, and there will be a strict examination of all his papers. Do not misunderstand me. I have nothing to fear. In a month we shall be at war with Saxon, Dane, Pole, and Muscovite, and the King will see who are the traitors and who the honest men. At the same time, I would not have you imagine this business is ended."

"No, Herr Grefve," I said, stoutly, "it is not."

"Nor," he rejoined, in his passionless calm, "would I have you think I am in the dark as to who has used you as a tool. Poor Karl! he shall not die unavenged. I promise you that. I do not refer to yourself," he added, with his bloodless smile, "for, upon my word! you have not deserved what you have suffered. You have better stuff in you than those who fooled you. Nay, more; you have eaten our bread and tried when left to yourself to do your duty. Let this business so far as you and I are concerned, stand there. Now that you are leaving Sweden for ever, let us only remember that."

"Again I thank you," I said, not a little touched; "but, sir, have we not forgotten one thing—the truth?"

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"You think," he interrupted, in his deep voice, "that you know the truth?"

"That does not matter," I replied, earnestly. "There it is—the truth. And as you and I, sir, are here, to-day, the truth will prevail, in your life, in the life of the Countess Polenstjerna, and in mine; for the truth is not ours."

He made no reply. What was in his mind God alone knows, but in justice to my Lord Bengt I say his face showed no sign of remorse or fear, nor yet of confidence or pride of strength. He had done what he had done, and he was ready to abide by it without flinching.

"So be it then," he answered at length. And then having informed me he would fetch me in half an hour's time, he went his way. Strange to say, I had not offended him, and, although I had refused his hand, I had not stirred his noble's blood. My Lord could understand many things that are hidden from punier spirits of the quality. Punctually within the half-hour I was standing in the great hall, and my heart throbbed when I saw my Lady in her doleful black gazing wearily into the fire.

"Ebba," said her cousin. "I have brought you M. Martin." He bowed to me and actually left us there alone. Of such a mighty courage and fearless dignity was he made!

Greeting did not pass between my mistress and myself. But I knelt at her feet and kissed her hand and thanked her in broken words for her sweet appeal on my behalf.

And then we stood in silence, neither having aught to say.

Slowly I turned away and had reached the door when she made me a sign to stay.

"Tell me, my friend," she asked, earnestly, "do you believe that this—this—is ended now?"

For a moment a fierce desire to tell her all choked me. But the cowardice of the man who loves mastered the desire. And I could not do it in the absence of my Lord who had trusted me.

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"Ah!" she cried, in a low whisper, "I read your answer. You think as I do. We, the Polenstjernas, have sinned against God and the King, and sin," she stretched out her arms wistfully, "sin does not end with punishment. I feel that it can never end."

"I do not believe that," I answered, gently; "there will be an end, but God alone knows what and when it will be."

"And there will be an end? You believe that!" Her eyes yearned for comfort.

"Yes, Countess, because there are two things stronger than sin, love and duty, and they are the privilege and grace of God to all of us. That is what I believe."

A faint radiance of hope stole into her pale cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered, softly, "I had forgotten in my misery. Ah! God! it is so easy to forget. Yes, there is love and duty."

It is true, as true as the sunlight then flooding that glorious hall, as true and as unconquerable. But, coward that I was, I had spoken but half the truth. But would you, face to face with a girl, innocent and God-fearing, stricken on the threshold of happy womanhood with an undeserved guilt and sorrow, pleading for help in the path of an orphan daughter's duty from one who loved her,—would you have dared to rob her of the one comfort that can make a woman's life sweet—belief in the man whom she loved? Would you have dared in the absence of that man to say what you could not prove; to rob him, too, of the place for repentance of which he himself had spoken? If not, you may not condemn my cowardice. We said good-bye, my Lady and I, and parted.

My Lord conducted me to the sleigh. "You return to England?" he inquired. "I ask because a time of trouble is coming, but——"

"I am going to Dresden," I interrupted, briefly.

"To Dresden?" he stepped back and searched my eyes. The idea was surprising and painful. "Do not do it," he

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added, in a low voice. "I speak as one wishing you well. Go back to England ; wait till the time of war is over and I promise you you shall return to Polenstjerna."

"The truth is at Dresden," I said, facing him boldly.

He laughed. "No," he answered, with fierce decision, "it is not."

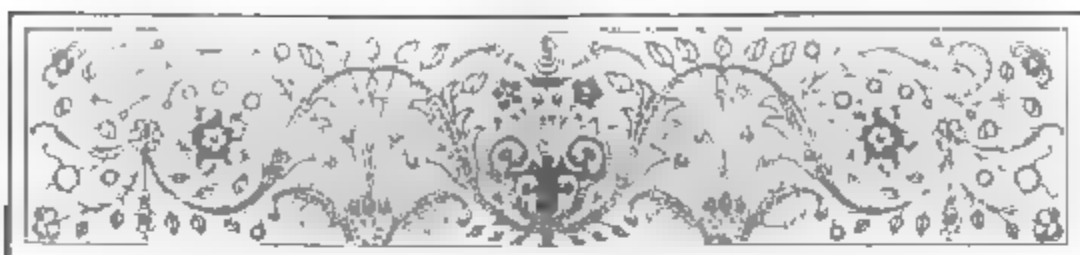
I studied his troubled eyes. I was more determined than ever in my resolve.

"Very good," he said, after a pause, his manner quite altered, "if you must go, you must. I can simply say this : At Dresden you hope to meet, you will meet, the Graf von Waldschlösschen. I repeat, I have no grudge against you, M. Martin, but I desire you to tell the Graf that him—him alone I can neither forget nor forgive."

"I will deliver the message," I replied, stirred by his tone to defiance.

A calm salute, and then I left him standing in the shadow of the antique barbican ; it was I, not he, who was troubled now ; but my Lord knew that my sleigh was taking the road to Malmö and Dresden.





CHAPTER XXIV

THE GRATITUDE OF AUGUSTUS THE STRONG

IN the chill dusk a lean and muddy traveller was riding into the courtyard of "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg." The inn looked as rickety and tumble-down, the cobblestones as foul as ever, but the slatternly silence, the lonely air of mystery, had given way to bustle and joviality. The pinions of war were spread over the land. The streets through which M. Martin had ridden were swarming with fierce soldiers riding hither and thither, with carts and wag-gons; and in this once hushed court three or four horses were standing, their riders, booted and armed, chattering and laugh-ing, and coaches were being cleaned amid a Babel of oaths and jests, German, French, and Polish. Yonder under the tarnished sign-board had appeared the familiar figure of the wonderful Fräulein, her hair as red, her dress as flaunting, her eyes as impudent as in the sauciest and most wayward moods of peace. On the edge of her shameless bodice flick-ered the tiny ivory and silver elephant hanging by its gold chain. Aye, even to her earrings wobbling at her waggish sallies, it was precisely the Fräulein Kätchen whose refined insolence and exuberant womanhood had once frightened and disgusted me. Thank God for it ! At last I was where I had friends.

"And who is this ?" was her greeting, with a toss of her wicked chin. "Who is this who calls me Gnädiges Fräu-lein ? No, sir," she answered over her shoulder, "we are

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full: you must go elsewhere. *Du lieber Jesus!* M. Martin! what in the—?” she had dropped on her heels, with fingers trembling on her apron.

“Yes,” I said, “it is M. Martin.”

She flung a hasty glance at the men staring at her and at me. “I was expecting you later,” she said, to my surprise; “of course, sir, your room is ready,” and blowing on her whistle she called out rapid and peremptory orders in Polish. “This way, sir, permit me,” she said, obsequiously, and ushered me into the hall, that hall once buried in stifling silence, but in which now a round half-dozen officers were talking, drinking, gesticulating. Gone—all the mysterious part was gone now; men, soldiers, officers, at every turn; save for Kätchen not the flounce of a petticoat anywhere. The gallants in the hall stopped their drinking to nudge one another, puzzled by the humility of their haughty, defiant hostess to this toil-worn scarecrow in a brown riding suit. But they were not so puzzled as I was. Kätchen followed me into the parlour, and no sooner was the door between us and those inquisitive eyes in the hall than deference flew away with a wicked whisk of the skirts and she kicked the door to behind her. But surely it was not necessary to convince me, M. Martin, that her silk hose were as fine, her ankle as neat as when I had been permitted to see it months ago. I dropped into a chair. I was worn out.

“You!” she burst out, in a pet. “What the devil are you doing in Dresden?” She beat with her foot on the floor. “Oh! it is too disgusting what fools men can be!” She walked up to the chair as if to shake me. Voice and eyes softened.

“Are you ill, M. Martin?” she asked, quickly.

“No; I have been ill, very ill, but I am well again. The roads were bad, and I am not so strong as I was.”

“Well? Pouf! your face is as white as a ghost’s; you are a bag of bones. And your eyes that used—*um Gottes*

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willen ! don't look like that. I am not the Devil though I am a woman. Whence do you come ? ”

“ From Lübeck, where I was ill. Before that from Polenstjerna.”

She whistled softly. “ *Der Teufel ist los*, ” she muttered. “ And so you come from Polenstjerna to Dresden—to Dresden ! *Allmächtiger Gott* ! ”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Oh ! hold your tongue ! Don't dare to say anything or I 'll have you popped straight to bed by two of my wenches ; it 's all you are fit for at present.”

“ Do you imagine, ” I cried, “ I have come to Dresden to go to bed ? For God's sake, Madam——”

“ Madam ! ” She put out her tongue at me.

“ Kätchen, ” I said, humbly, offering her my hand, “ there shall be no secrets, I promise you. Now tell me at once, why did you behave like that outside, when here——”

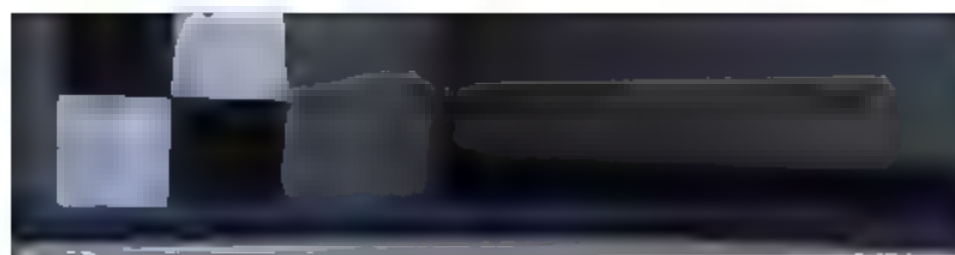
“ You did n't grasp ? ” She crumpled up her apron delightedly. “ Lord ! M. Martin, you are travelling on the King's business.” She laughed at my bewilderment. “ You are—out there—*wissen Sie* ? ” and she winked, with a plump finger on her saucy nose. “ Can't you see that we don't want every idle pate and loose tongue in this hell of a city to be prating that M. Martin has arrived in Dresden ? Bless my soul ! anyone might hear of it, and men say women cannot keep a secret—men, quotha ! ”

I saw now, and I did not like it, not at all.

“ I want the Graf von Waldschlösschen. Is he here ? ” I demanded feverishly.

She shrugged her shoulders and stood sucking the tiny elephant in amused pity.

“ I do not know, ” she replied. “ I hope not. But I can't stay here talking all the night. Go to bed, M. Martin, and in the morning you will take horse again. Dresden, as I told you before, is not the city for you.” She whisked round and skipped to the door. “ A nice mess, ” she cried, bitterly,



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"you and the Graf have made of it—you and his Excellency between you. Why, you could not even take Riga. And now there is nothing but damned soldiers everywhere; and the Swedes will come and burn Dresden as they did in my grandfather's time; and the Poles and the Muscovites will come, who treat women as we treat pigs; oh! it's a pretty prospect for kings and us poor wenches!" She flung the door open, curtseying in the most provoking way. "Will you be pleased to come up-stairs, sir?" she said, in a loud voice, causing all eyes to fix on us. "The Herr Graf," she murmured coaxingly to the whiskered desperado at my elbow, "bids you good evening, gentlemen, and begs that you will drink his Majesty's health. He regrets that the roads from Poland have fatigued him so that he cannot join you."

How they whispered and stared as I made my escape up the stairs, demurely escorted by my hostess.

"Lord!" she exclaimed, when we reached the familiar attic, "did n't I smoke them nicely! A woman, M. Martin, can't always fool a man, but she can always fool an officer."

"And the Graf," I questioned, "tell me, I beseech you, is he in Dresden?"

"I am going to find out." Her skirts were fluttering down the passage, and up from the hall rose the roystering laughs of the soldiers drinking the royal health at the expense of the man who travelled on the King's business. I sat on the bed and reflected. A nice mess indeed we had made of it, the Graf and his Excellency and I between us! The plot, if ever there had been a serious plot, which I doubted, had only been used as a device by which two ambitious schemers snatched at the Devil's instruments forged in Dresden to ruin each the plans of the other; and in the hands of the Fru Countess and my Lord Bengt, Karl and my Lady and I had been so many tools, so many pawns. Only too well did I know how that part of it had ended. Nor had his Excellency and Herr Patkul fared much better. The hellish *coup*

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against Riga and the effort to raise a rebellion in Livonia had been so far foiled, thanks to the gallantry of the Swedes and Count Dahlberg ; and now the boy King was preparing to take summary vengeance on all concerned.

And I—I had staked all on getting to Dresden ! At last I was here, snatched from death by lingering fever at Lübeck. I had come to find the Graf, and Kätchen greeted me in her way with what my Lord Bengt had said so courteously in his. I shivered.

One by one the sounds of bustle and joviality, of men and horses coming and going within and without, gradually died away. The respite of a restless night began to lap the hostelry in an eery silence. I would better go to bed. I took off my coat. Ha ! what was that ? Only a rat or a mouse. There it was again. I listened. Surely someone was stumbling and fumbling along the wall.

“ *Potztausend !* ” growled a stifled voice. “ Curse the darkness ! ”

Intoxicated with the maddest joy I had flung the door open ; before me was the man whom I had struggled all these weary miles to see. It would be all right now.

“ It ’s really you, my bookworm ? ” he muttered. “ That jade Kätchen was not romancing.” I grasped both his hands, for words failed me.

“ You are in luck,” he said, coolly. “ I have a *billet-doux* for you. Kätchen made me swear you should have it at once.”

I did not recognise the writing on the cover, and as I broke the wafer a faint odour of perfume greeted my nostrils. What my astonished eyes read was as follows in French :

“ I cannot see you, and it would be useless for you to try. Take Kätchen’s advice and leave Dresden as soon as you can ; the sooner the better. I have not forgotten and shall not forget. I write this as your friend. Adieu ! ”

I read it and reread it, utterly mystified. It was a woman’s handwriting in haste. Could it be ? was it——?

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"Tell me who wrote that," I asked, in a sharp fear.

He studied it slowly and seriously. It did not please him either. "That settles it," he said, with grave decision. "When I leave Dresden to-morrow, my friend, you will come with me."

"You know the writer, then?"

"*Kreutzsapperment!* I do. It is either the Devil or the Princess Rapierska."

"The—" I sat down, amazed. My guess had been right.

"Yes, I congratulate you," he proceeded, with a dry ferocity. "It is not everyone who has the Princess for his friend. When a woman, my bookworm, says something nice to a friend, you can believe her or not, as you choose; but when the advice is nasty, well—" He whistled softly and crumpled up the scrap of perfumed paper.

"But how—how can the Princess know?" I faltered.

He grinned over a pinch of snuff. "Kätchen," he said, "is waiting downstairs to hear your story; and remember that if Kätchen could not read most men as you read a book, and hold her tongue, she would not be mistress of 'The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg.'"

Without another syllable he blew out the candles and we groped our way by the dim light of the little lantern which he carried under his cloak down to the splendid chamber on the first floor in which I had held converse with Kätchen before. The room was shabbily lighted and the mocking shadows danced and disappeared on the superb tapestries where the clothesless gods and goddesses, the muses and nymphs in their garlands of fruit and flowers, did honour to the black-browed Titan King with the Order of the White Elephant about his neck and the lyre of Apollo in his hand.

"I thought," Kätchen said, reading my questioning face, "I might save you a useless journey to the Princess."

"Never mind about the Princess," the Graf interrupted sharply. "It is your story, my philosopher, that we must hear."

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Kätchen shook her earrings at him, and quietly pushed me into the most comfortable chair in the room ; and to the Graf I recited forthwith all—from the moment when he had scrambled down to the moat to the moment when I turned my back on Polenstjerna. But it was Kätchen, after all, kneeling listlessly on a cushion by the hearth, who inspired me to do my best. I had not spoken half a dozen sentences when she ceased toying with her elephant ; at the mention of Greta and Axel's help, she leaned forward, smiling a host of naughty thoughts ; tears dropped on her gaudy bodice at Karl's death ; and I could hear her excited breathing, for she, too, was racing to Kungsör, she, too, stood in the presence of the King while the trumpets and the laughter of the peasant girls rang in her ears ; she was on the sleigh which swept me to Polenstjerna, and when I burnt the papers she sprang to her feet waving her apron in triumph, only to cry angrily, as my Lady told the truth, " Idiot—idiot, and a woman ! "

I fell back exhausted. Kätchen dropped on her knees again, and was softly stroking her cheek with the ribbons of her bodice ; the Graf glowered into the stove, as if my recital had cowed him.

Presently he rose, stretched himself, and put a quiet hand on my shoulder. " You did your best," he said, " and honestly I did not think you had the courage to play like that. Give me your fist, my bookworm. By God! Kätchen," he added, " you and I could make something out of him, eh ? "

Kätchen patted her plump shoulders. " M. Martin," she replied, " for my taste uses women too little, and trusts them too much. But he will learn, he is learning, fast."

" I hope not," rejoined the Graf, caressing her red hair. " So remember, I won't have you spoil him, *mein schatz*. He is best as a bookworm. But what is it you seek in Dresden, my prince of philosophers ? "

" My honour and the truth."

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Kätchen and he broke into rude laughter.

"And anything more?" he inquired. "Go on, it is interesting."

"I desire nothing but the truth," I answered, sulkily. "Come, Graf, do you tell me, you who dwelt with Bengt and the Fru Countess; you whose friend has been killed, whose character in Sweden is ruined; you who know the Fröken Countess is innocent; do you tell me to sit still and do nothing? Can you forgive and forget?" And then I repeated my Lord Bengt's last message from Polenstjerna. I meant to cut down into the quick, and I succeeded.

"No," the Graf whispered, "I do not forget or forgive. Should my Lord Bengt cross my path we shall not part till some inches of steel are between the ribs of one or other of us."

"But you forget, there is the King," I said, triumphantly. "I have his Majesty's promise and his ring."

Again Kätchen and he laughed. "Pawn it, my book-worm," he answered, with savage gaiety; "you may as well have the money. The King! God bless my soul! As if the King cared a twopenny curse for the truth or any woman's innocence. The King indeed! He is not at Dresden, to begin with."

"Not here?" My spirit sank.

"No, he is at Warsaw, preparing to take the field. Are you riding to find him at Warsaw, or Riga, or Cracow, or in perdition?"

"Then where are the papers?"

"You burnt them. The truth is in the fire and so are the lies too. Papers? of course there are papers, heaps of 'em. But not even Kätchen can tell you who has them, the King or Von Flemming, or the Graf von Böse. Flemming is sitting outside Riga as grateful as a wounded bear; the Graf von Böse! Pouf! try and see whether he will oblige you, only do not ask me to go with you, that is all."

I could have slapped Kätchen, sitting there sucking her

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ribbons and her elephant, smirking at the pink shadows of her plump shoulders in the mirror and cuddling her slippers and brown silk ankles.

“ I bide my time,” said the Graf, “ and then—” he took a pinch of snuff. “ Reflect, my tutor. War at Riga, war in Holstein ; the Danes have stormed the trenches at Husum ; but the Brunswicker will be over the Elbe in a day or two ; the Swedes are moving, and their fleet will try a fall in the Baltic with the Dane ; the Muscovite may be harrying Finland at this moment. What did I tell you at Polenstjerna? Did I not prophesy aright? Such a war is beginning in the North as has not been seen since Gustavus Adolphus of blessed memory and that damned plundering Polenstjerna Field Marshal put the fear of God and the heretic Swede in every Catholic wench from Frankfurt to München. Is this a time for the truth and the innocence of women and book-worms? Try, try it and see. No, no, we must bide our time. In a year we shall know if King Augustus and his friends the Dane and the Muscovite will win, and if so, by God ! we will wring the neck of Bengt Polenstjerna ; they do not love him here in Dresden. And if King Charles wins, then King Augustus will whine the naked truth from the housetops. And we shall see *then* who forgets and forgives, we shall.”

“ It is not like you, Graf,” I said, obstinately, “ to run away.”

“ Pardon me,” he answered, “ I always run away when my own skin is in danger and I see no chance of hurting anyone but myself.”

“ But you—are *you* in danger ? ”

“ Ask Kätchen where she found me, lurking in a dirty pott-house. Tell the boy, for God’s sake ! *mein Liebchen*, what you think of it all.”

Kätchen cast a reluctant glance at her dainty slippers ; she let the elephant fall upon her breast. Then she rose and knelt down beside me, and looked into my face. “ Who

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was it," she asked, slowly, "who was it, M. Martin, who revealed the plot at Kungsör?"

"Good heav—what! do they know that here?"

The Graf grinned and took a pinch of snuff. "Who was it," Kätchen pursued, with an amiable purr, "who carried off Count Karl under his Excellency's nose? who found his Majesty and a lady and three men in masks in my parlour? who is it, in short, who knows much more than any respectable gentleman should know, and who is so anxious to tell all the world what he knows? eh, M. Martin?"

She sank upon her heels and sucked at that infernal elephant. Presently she held up her hand and counted on her fingers. "You left Polenstjerna on March 15th; it is now the 4th of May—one, two, three—eight weeks, I think. Perhaps someone in Sweden has had time to send a message of what has happened there—perhaps a bird told—" she licked her lips, and I shuddered.

"Did you ever hear, *mein lieber Herr*, of the Königstein?" she asked, gently. "Then let me tell you it is a noble castle, kept up by the King for those persons, men, I mean,—women we manage in another way in Dresden,—who know too much, who think the truth is what everyone wants. Three years ago a gallant young gentleman,—he gave me these earrings,—well, he was indiscreet; a lady, it is always a lady," she sighed, "the jade, I hate her! Well, one fine morning my gallant friend wanted the truth—and he has found it in the Königstein. God knows, he may be enjoying it there now."

I pushed her away angrily and sprang up. "It is infamous!" I spluttered.

Kätchen placidly wheeled round on her knees. "Sh! sh!" she said, "you must not talk like that in this room. It is not infamous, it is only royal. And it is the truth, which is what you want, I think." She subsided into cooing laughter till she must use her apron to wipe her eyes.

Oh! I could have shaken her had not my eye fallen on

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the black-browed Apollo King with his clothesless rout about him, and instead I shivered all down my back.

“ You see,” the Graf joined in, “ we all say the same, Kätchen and I and the lady who is not a jade,” he bowed to Kätchen, “ and my Lord Bengt, and that is,—pardon the expression,—‘ Clear out ! ’ ”

Kätchen rose, and shook the dust from her skirts with unnecessary vehemence. “ Good night, gentlemen,” she said; “ I will leave you to make your own arrangements. And I shall take permission, M. Martin, to present your humble duties to-morrow to the Princess and to thank her for her advice and say that you will gratefully obey. Adieu ! ” From the door she paused to blow an airy kiss to the Graf and give a swirling salute to myself.

“ You are coming, then ? ” the Graf inquired.

“ I suppose so,” I replied, sullenly. Alas ! for all my hopes.

“ Courage, my friend ! ” he said ; “ we have fooled King Eric’s Tower, we may yet hoist my Lord Bengt with his own petard.”

“ Much good that will be ! ” I answered, sulkily. And he made no attempt to contradict me. Skulking and loafing in dirty pothouses does not breed spirit or cheerfulness even in the Graf. Yes, our day, if it ever came, would be too late. The truth might save my Lady now ; in two or three years it would only shatter her life. But we were helpless.

And so it came about that at the appointed hour for our escape Kätchen herself fetched me down from my attic. She had cleared the inn by her magic arts and crafts, and I met the Graf alone in the hall, who bade our hostess adieu with that jauntiest abandon which I had learned always concealed feelings he would fain hide from his best friends. He strode into the court and Kätchen and I fidgeted at being alone. I had nothing to say ; and apparently she had nothing to say either.

“ The horses are waiting,” she remarked at last, and we

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walked out in the stupidest silence. The Graf was already mounted. "The East Gate," I heard her mutter, adding something which I could not catch.

Thoroughly ashamed of my boorishness, I stooped in the saddle and stammered out a halting apology. "Good-bye, M. Martin," she said, in a low voice, but when I would have kissed her hand she snatched it back, turned, and disappeared. Not a little hurt, I spurred after the Graf. "Where the devil did you learn that?" he remarked, gruffly, drawing rein.

"What?" I asked, in genuine surprise.

"You have a real friend there," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Kätchen never allows anyone whom she really respects to kiss her hand, and they are precious few, I can tell you. How the devil did you do it?"

But I could not explain. I have never been able to understand the working of a young woman's mind, and I never shall, for the books can teach you nothing about that subtlest of all God's mysteries.

The officer on guard at the East Gate, after a very short glance at the passes provided by Kätchen, was about to let us ride through.

"Curse it!" the Graf suddenly growled, "we are too early, or Kätchen was wrong."

Another officer had strolled out from the guard-room and the passes must be inspected again. The new officer turned his lantern upon our faces and scrutinised us carefully.

"This is not your real name," he said, brusquely, after an anxious minute; "you are the Graf von Waldschlösschen. You will dismount." At the same time he ordered my horse to be stopped.

I protested, but it was useless, and I was compelled to join the Graf in the guard-room.

"It is," he cheered me by remarking, "the gratitude of his Majesty. I wonder whether it will be the Lilienstein or the Königstein."

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“ You do not mean—” I began in a sweating dismay.

He kicked the logs of the guard-room fire meditatively.

“ My Lord Bengt spoke the truth,” he muttered. “ It will be the Königstein.”

“ What ! Bengt ! it is impossible.”

“ Ah ! my friend, in Dresden it is always the impossible. You are young,” he added, disconsolately, “ and a young man’s tongue can last an infernally long time. Oh ! why the devil did you come to Dresden ? ”

In half an hour we were informed that by his Majesty’s orders the Graf von Waldschlösschen and all in his company were to be arrested. They were not in his Majesty’s confidence, the officers remarked dryly to my indignant questions, and we would do well to obey. In vain the Graf endeavoured to persuade them to let me go free. They were sorry, they said ; they had nothing against the gentleman, but such were their orders and it could not be helped.

“ Graf,” I pleaded, “ we stand or fall together.”

“ That,” he replied, “ is the silliest thing you have ever said,” but for all that he took my hand and looked into my eyes. With men and women of the world young fools will always be young fools ; and to some young fools respect and gratitude are worth more than a woman’s kisses and a man’s fear.

The Graf proved to be right. It was the Königstein, and that very night we were taken thither as prisoners of State, if such a title could be of any comfort to us. The whole episode was so strange that the gravity of my position did not come home to me till we were parted at the entrance to the grim fortress, perched on its mighty crags of basalt above the pleasant Elbe, now sweeping past the rolling hills and dense woods green and smiling in the tender dawn of a May morning.

“ ‘ The tongue of a young man,’ ” I muttered, as I crossed the moat, “ ‘ can last a horribly long time.’ ”

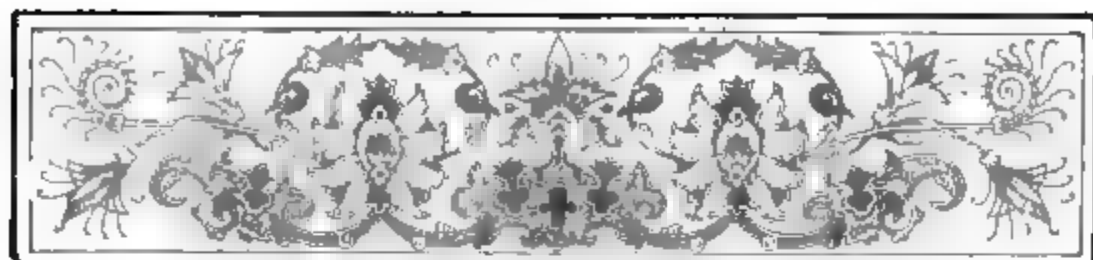
They searched me, but took nothing away, not even the

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King's ring, which, with my explanation, caused the searchers no small merriment.

Yet as soon as I was alone, I hurled that royal emerald, which polluted the loneliness of my chamber cell, out towards the yellow Elbe. I had done forever with the gratitude of his Majesty Augustus the Strong.





PART II

THE SECRET FORD

CHAPTER I

AFTER TWO YEARS

THE room at the top of the tower in Schlöss Königstein was scarcely nine feet square, and was both bare and cold. One little window, barred across its dirty panes with iron clamps, was all it had, and through it the weary prisoner could gaze out upon the grey February sky, and over the menacing girdle of ramparts and bastions down from his height on which that accursed fortress stood, upon the turbid Elbe swirling, swollen with winter snows, at the foot of the pine-topped crags of basalt. How often had that weary prisoner stared for hours together through that mocking peephole, in winter cold and summer heats, watching, watching, watching the days breaking and setting, clouds and storm, sunshine and rain, and wondering how it had once felt to be free! Two years in a young man's life spent in pacing up and down like a caged beast, or in stony solitude at a tiny dirty window, in Schlöss Königstein ; and out there over the swaying pines and the joyous firs, beyond and round the rolling snow-tipped mountains, lay the world that was

free : out there were men and women free—free to breathe and live, to eat and drink, to be sad or merry, to plot and plan, to love and hate. Even in the courtyard below, the Saxon sentinel leaning on his pike and blowing on his numbed fingers was free. Dear God! they were all free, all but one heartbroken young man who had tried to do his duty and who was now condemned to tramp to a prisoner's grave in silence. The door into the room opened with the grinding of its rusty locks, but M. Martin paid no heed. It was only his gaoler bringing his daily portion of the black bread and the cold beer with which they kept him alive to feel that there was freedom for others, but not for him.

“ Does M. Martin spend all his days at the window ? ” questioned a gay voice. Where had I heard that voice ? It seemed to ring with mocking echoes down the hollow vaults of two years.

Great heavens ! could it be ? no, it was impossible !—yes, it must be, unless I dreamed—it *was* the Graf ! plump, with the colour of free blood in his cheeks and a free and gay ribbon in the tail of his wig, and his black eyes twinkled as they had twinkled two years ago.

He advanced with outstretched arms. “ I am not a ghost, my bookworm,” he said ; “ I am real flesh and blood, and I am come to let you out, if you wish it.”

“ If I wish it ! ” The room reeled round me ; the dirty little window grew larger and larger until it burst its bars and became the world beyond, the world of air and love and freedom.

“ Drink it up.” The Graf was leaning over me, and there was a glass of red wine at my lips.

“ *Potztausend !* that is a brave bookworm. Half an hour, you pale-faced prisoner, in the air outside will soon put strength into you, I'll warrant. You are a bit thin and there's a touch of grey in your pretty brown locks. But bless my soul ! You will grow as fat as I am, and the grey hair will drop out.”

“Free ! free ! Say it again, dear Graf.”

“I will say it as often as you please. Here 's to health and freedom,—freedom, my bookworm, to rollick and carouse and eat,—and the wenches will make up to you for these two lean years, trust me they will,—and drink.”

How good it was ! I had not tasted wine for so long, and this rich red wine whispered freedom in my throat and sent freedom throbbing through my prisoned veins. I began to feel hungry, to feel warm, to desire to march about and sing.

“Tell me everything,” I pleaded, “everything.”

The Graf swung himself with a merry laugh upon the rickety table and winked at me over the brimming glass, and I laughed too. We might have been in my chamber at Polenstjerna Castle, and Greta — ah ! a stab went through me. There was no Greta now, and Polenstjerna Castle was only a dream which had never been true.

“Six months ago,” he said, slowly, “they let me out, and now they are going to do the same by you.” He held up a snuffy forefinger. “But on one condition, and that is——”

“What ?” I cried. “Do not torture me.”

“You will have to go on a mission.”

I jumped to my feet. “A mission ! My God ! I will go on fifty.”

“Exactly what I said. So now I can tell them you are their man. Bravo ! No, no, I cannot stop ;” he disengaged my hand. “Presently they will give you money and a horse ; you must then come to Dresden, the old inn,”—he winked solemnly, did this glorious messenger from the world of free men and women,—“and you and I will have a talk. *Potztausend !* there is a good deal to say. *Ade ! Ade !*”

And even before I could stammer out one of the hundred questions that fought for utterance he had slipped from the room. But I was free ! free ! free ! I laid my head on the table, no longer rickety, and sobbed with joy. Free ! ah ! you who have never been a prisoner because you tried to do

your duty when you were young and the blood was hot in your veins and the world was fair,—how can you even guess what was in my heart? Free! I was free!

By midday, thanks to his Majesty's express commands, I was permitted to bid adieu to the now courteous Governor. Booted and spurred as in the days of my youth, I was riding along the Dresden road, a sword at my side, a real, live horse between my knees, and that accursed Königstein frowning a grim good-bye from its merciless heights above the yellow Elbe. Never had mud and melting snow seemed so pleasant, for it was mud beneath me, not creaking boards gnawed by rats; never had a bitter wind blown so sweet. I took off my hat and waved it; my pale cheeks wooed the embrace of the bitter wind; I sang the tavern songs of the Graf. Let them think me mad if they pleased; I was free! and in the dusk a muddy and sweaty horse carried its muddy and weary rider into that courtyard from which in my shivering dreams I had so often ridden out to become a prisoner. Dresden was a city of the dead in this February dusk, and the courtyard of "The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg" was dirtier and more silent than in the most feverish fantasy of a prisoner's nightmare. Silence hung over the tarnished tiles and the slatternly windows, and between the rough stones of the paving rank weeds grew. It was the Graf who let me in, who led the way to the parlour, so cozy with its closed shutters and drawn curtains and the stove sputtering with winter logs.

"Kätchen is here no longer," said the Graf. "Things have altered in two years, my bookworm."

"If Kätchen is not here," I asked, with a catch in my voice, "what, then, is this?" On one of the chairs lay a woman's gloves and a woman's fur wrap.

"Don't ask impertinent questions," he replied. "Eat, drink, and be merry, for I will not say a single word till you have eaten. Eat, I say."

And when we had eaten we drew our chairs up to the

sputtering stove ; and as I sucked in the tobacco and warmed my muddy, aching legs, and the red wine caressed my heart, I began to feel that there were other things in freedom's gift than the saddle between one's knees, and the snow and rain in the biting breath of the east wind. A subtle, intoxicating perfume seemed to float out from those gloves and that wrap ; they were only a woman's gloves and a woman's wimple. I had forgotten almost what a woman could be, and I, Hugh Martin, hungered after Kätchen's presence, —after the sympathy of a woman's eyes and the music of a woman's laughter. Such revolutions will two years of God-forsaken loneliness work in a man who once had been a student and had cared only for his masters, Plato and Mr. Locke !

“ Yes,” said the Graf, thoughtfully. “ I can guess what you are feeling. Six months ago I, too, tasted once more fowls and wine and tobacco. I looked into a wench's eyes and kissed again a wench's lips, and I was lean and weak. Ha ! ” he laughed and smacked his thigh, “ I have become fat and strong, and, thank God ! my wrist is as supple and my eye as clear now as ever it was.”

His eyes flashed like a smouldering log when it is struck, and the carnal lust of life, of love, and revenge stiffened his wiry body. And I felt that my eyes would presently flash, too, and that freedom could give me worse things than revenge.

“ You spoke of a mission,” I said, slowly ; “ tell me of that.”

“ Be patient, my friend. It is not easy to explain, for the world is a very different one from what it was when those damned doors of the Königstein closed on you and me.”

Mysterious fingers twitched at the black curtain shrouding my memory and suddenly rolled it up with a snap. Riga and Kungsör, Schleswig-Holstein and the trenches of Husum, the plot and the Polenstjerna, sprang into my vision, and behind them all blew the salt breezes of the Baltic ; they

were blowing on my Lady's golden hair, and her cheeks and eyes were bright with the fragrance of the spring. They faced me, those far-off visions of a world in which I once had played my part : I had been dead ; I was alive again ; was it too late ?

" You remember what I said at Polenstjerna," began the Graf ; " war was on the horizon *then* ; it has come, *Allmächtiger Gott* ! it has come." He spat into the fire and his cheeks flushed a joyous grim red. " The King of Spain is dead ; in two months France and your country will be at war——"

" What ? "—I seized his arm. " France and my England at war——"

" Sit still. France and your country will be at war. Your King is dying ; you will have a new sovereign, a woman, and she and the Bourbon and the Hapsburg will have to fight for the kingdom of Spain, and it will be a fight to the death. If you have any stomach, *mon ami*, for the sword you will get your bellyful of fighting now."

" But Sweden," I cried, " oh ! do not tell me she has been beaten."

" Beaten ! *Potztausend* ! Beaten ! they are fiends, those Swedes, and that boy King is the devil himself. Listen, my bookworm ; in two years he has thrashed Denmark, he has thrashed the Czar, and he has thrashed my master, Augustus the Strong, and driven his troops, as a boy drives geese, from the banks of the Düna. And he has drubbed his Excellency General von Flemming as you may drub a stable varlet. At this moment King Charles is somewhere on the borders of Poland, and we are quaking as to what will happen if he is not stopped."

I threw up my hat in joy uncontrollable. Ha ! I might yet live to see, floating in the hall of Polenstjerna Castle, the flags and the spoils of the man—Augustus the Strong—who had flung me into the Königstein.

" I repeat," said the Graf, licking his lips, " that that

young King is the devil himself. His life is charmed ; neither snow nor ice, neither forests nor water, can balk him of his prey ; it is amazing ; and he cannot endure the sight of a woman, which is more amazing still. Why, there has not been such a king nor such fighters as his Swedes since Gustavus Adolphus swept Germany like a murrain."

I threw up my hat again. The God of battles and of Sweden, whose eyes were on the truth, had done this. He had arisen in His majesty to shake terribly the earth.

"Pfui !" said the Graf, winking. "You must not throw up your hat like that. You forget that I am in the Saxon service and—so are you."

"I ?" The King of Poland's pass burned in my pocket. Confound the King of Poland !

"Yes, to be sure. Now sit still and do not interrupt. The King of Sweden has sworn that because of my master's treachery," he laughed, "he will not sheathe his sword until he has kicked my master off his Polish throne and put someone whom he can trust in his place."

"Good heavens !"

"My master," the Graf said, quietly, "you will remember, started with a mighty league of three friends who were to have the spoiling of Sweden,—Denmark, Poland, and the Czar. Denmark has made peace ; she is still bloody from the paw of that young lion, the King of Sweden ; the Czar has been thrashed for the time ; Poland alone remains, and Poland is wavering. The Swedish Ministers want peace ; their country is sore put to it to find money and men, and the Ministers fear the Czar more than the foul fiend himself. They want peace to fight the Czar, and beat him to his knees ; my master wants peace that he may make love. The mischief is that the Czar wants my master to fight——"

"But why ?"

"The old story. The cat would have fish, but would not wet her feet."

"And King Charles—what does he want ?"

"God alone knows what he really wants. But you take me? Sweden and Saxony hunger after peace, and so you and I have got to get it for them."

"What!" I protested, feebly.

"You and I have been let out to do it, at least so they say, and we must believe them. It will be a devilish hard job; but if we succeed, my bookworm, our day will have come, and then—" he licked his lips and slowly rubbed his hands, "and then——"

"But I—what can I do?"

He leaned forward and tapped me gently on the knee. "Peace," he said, "is such a blessed thing that the Swedish Ministers are working behind their master's back. They have an agent at Warsaw who—" He laid his finger on his nose and solemnly winked, "and they want a go-between, someone who, pardon me, is obscure, not a liar by trade, who knows French and Swedish and Latin, and apparently my master has remembered that such an one was to be found in the Königstein. You, my bookworm, are to be the go-between."

"I am not going to Warsaw," I replied, doggedly; "I am going back to the Königstein. I will not be a go-between for all the freedom in the world."

He spat into the fire and took a pinch of snuff, and his eyes wandered off to the chair upon which lay the woman's gloves and the woman's wimple.

"When we are at Warsaw," he pursued, with the most provoking coolness, "we——"

"I tell you, I am not going to Warsaw."

"Yes, you are to be the go-between, not I. Remember, I beg, that I am in the service of his Excellency General von Flemming." He cocked up his head and grinned.

"What in heaven's name do you mean?" I demanded, peevishly.

"While you arrange for peace with the agent of the King of Sweden behind the King's back, I understand that my

little job is to spy on you in the interest of our friend his Excellency. That is how we still do things at the glorious Court of his Majesty Augustus the Strong."

His eyes had again wandered to the woman's gloves and rested on them with a caressing interest, while I ground my teeth.

"I would have you bear in mind, *mon ami*," he began, "that there are three parties at Warsaw: the Poles, the Saxons, and the Muscovites, and they are fighting to the death for the carcase of my noble master. You, I have learned, represent the Poles, I should say the Polish women, the charming ladies of the Polish Court, you and the agent of the King of Sweden—" He stretched out his hand and began to finger softly one of the unknown woman's gloves.

"And who is this mighty agent?" I demanded, scornfully.

"That," he replied, looking at the glove tenderly, "on my honour I may not tell you; and as you are not going to Warsaw, it does not matter. They will easily find another go-between," he pursued, disregarding my angry snort, "to plan in the interests of Sweden, the Polish ladies, and his Eminence the Cardinal——"

"The Cardinal! What cardinal?"

The Graf chuckled at my sharp question. "In the Königstein you can think at leisure over his name," he replied, his eyes twinkling. "He is called Cardinal Radziejowski, and he is the master of Poland, as his Excellency intends to be the master of Saxony; and the Cardinal's niece, I beg you to note, is the Princess Lubomirska. She is *the* Polish woman. Perhaps you remember her?"

"Then there has been no revolution?" I cried.

"No, not yet; it is yet to come. There are and have been other ladies, of course; they come and go like the flowers in the spring, poor innocents."

"And the Princess Rapierska?" I interrupted, eagerly.

"Do not bother about the ladies," he answered, with a

face set hard as flint ; “ they are not the difficulty. One is as good as another. It is the Cardinal whose game no one can fathom. At present he is all for King Augustus, to-morrow he may be all for King Charles, and of course he is really all for himself, and, mark you, Poland will follow him. The conscience of a Pole—cardinal, noble, serf, or Jew—lies in the fattest money-bags. I know, for in 1697 I bought them by the score. We had the thalers then ; it is different now. So you see I have to keep my eye on the Cardinal, and on two princesses, and on whoever takes your place,—as dirty and dangerous a job as ever man attempted.”

“ And if the Cardinal goes over to King Charles, what then ? ”

The Graf pursed up his lips and took a pinch of snuff. “ It will be the devil for the Polish ladies and their friends, for I fancy there will be a clean sweep and the Court will become honest Saxon, good honest, German——”

“ But his Majesty will lose his Polish crown ? ”

“ Prison,” he said, with a tap of approval on my shoulder, “ has not destroyed your wits ; it is a pity you are going back to the Königstein. You would be right if you had not forgotten the Muscovites. If the Cardinal plays the King false, his Majesty will drop into the arms of the Muscovites, and then the Poles will be between the devil and the deep sea. Have you ever seen the Cossacks and Tartars making war, my bookworm, on their own account ? We Saxons, Poles, and Swedes are not exactly nuns or saints in the field ; we rip a bit as men will do, and it is well not to be a woman when our *reiters* are seeking quarters, but the Cossacks, God help you !——”

“ I hate the Muscovites,” I said, passionately. My Lady has taught me that among other lessons.

“ And so do we all. And there’s no one hates them more than your Pole. But beggars cannot be choosers, and if the Muscovites will keep the Polish crown on my master’s head, Saxon and Muscovite will herd together somehow.”

I closed my eyes. Yes, I did well to go back to the Königstein.

“ You remember Patkul ? ” he asked, after a pause.

“ What ! is he at Warsaw ? ” The giant figure rose up before me, and those dark eyes, smouldering with immortal hate. Kungsör and Riga, and now Warsaw !

“ Yes, he is there, I believe. They call him General Patkul now, and he is in the service of the Czar. He let loose this cursed war, the dirty Livonian traitor ! and now he is trying to patch up the rents made in his schemes by the King of Sweden. If Patkul falls into the hands of the Swedes he will have short shrift. But till that blessed result happens he is the man to fear and to watch. I am sorry you will not be there to help me balk him. For there our real work will begin.”

I sprang to my feet. “ Graf,” I demanded, throbbing with excitement, “ have you ever discovered who put us into that accursed Königstein ? ”

“ No, I do not know,” he replied, in the tones of a man telling a half-lie. His eyes wandered off to the woman’s wimple, and his nostrils snuffed the air like those of a blood-hound on the track. “ But I will tell you this,” he said : “ When peace is made I mean to offer my sword to King Charles, and, by God ! I will fight my way back to Polenstjerna.”

“ Then I, too, am coming to Warsaw,” I cried, and our hands met in a fervent clasp. Over there, beyond the snows and marshes of Poland gleamed my Lady’s smile, and not all the Königsteins or all the kings should keep me from treading this road. Yes ! I had done with Plato, and the road to Warsaw led to Moscow and to Polenstjerna, to where I had lost my honour and where alone I could recover it.

“ Yes,” said the Graf, “ peace first. The ladies have tried and failed——”

“ The ladies ? ”

“ The ladies, God bless them ! A few weeks ago his Maj-

esty sent the noblest of his mistresses—Aurora von Königsmark—to plead for peace with that young King of Sweden. But I hear he would not so much as look at her.”

“ And who may Aurora von Königsmark be ? ”

“ *Diantre!* Were you never at Moritzburg, my book-worm ? She is a Swede by birth, and she was, and is still, saving your Princess,” he made a comically profound bow, “ the most beautiful woman who ever came out of Sweden. And would you believe it ? my master deserted her for the Lubomirska, her, the great Aurora. Yet for the love she bears to Augustus the Strong she went from her abbey of Quedlinburg to the King of Sweden’s camp, and he would not so much as look at her. *Allmächtiger!* if I were only King of Sweden ! ”

Choked into silence by my thronging thoughts, I stared at the woman’s wimple and at the sputtering stove. The toils were closing on me fast, but this time they were toils of my own making.

“ Graf,” I asked, timidly, “ have you any news of—of Polenstjerna ? ”

“ No,” he replied, quickly, “ I have not. But it is time for you to go to bed. The day after to-morrow we must start for Warsaw. We shall hear there if there is anything worth hearing. But I fear there is only bad news for you and me.”

He spoke but too truly ; there could be only bad news : so I allowed him to help my aching body up the stairs, and he left me in that room on the first floor, the shameless tapestries of which were now faded and moth-eaten. And I flung myself on the sofa, muddy boots and all, for I was too exhausted even to draw off my clothes.

But I could not sleep. A question haunted me and would give me no rest, so I stole through the hushed darkness back to the parlour. The light still gleamed under the door, and my timid tap caused a sudden flutter, as of a woman’s skirts within, while an alarmed voice uttered a suppressed

"Oh!" When the door was opened, I found myself staring stupidly at the Graf, who had a drawn sword in his hand. "You!" he exclaimed in great relief. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing, but I could not sleep until I knew what had become of Fräulein Kätchen."

"Come in," he replied, gaily. "I was wondering when you would remember that the world to which you have returned had women in it as well as men."

So I had not been mistaken. There was a woman, a young woman, in the parlour, standing in coy embarrassment by the curtains. Good heavens! It was the girl who had been my toast at Karl's supper party.

"*Herr Gott!*" said the Graf, even more astonished than I was. "You have met before?"

The girl had started and turned scarlet; standing there in the shadow of the curtains, with the lights dancing about her face and figure, she seemed to fill the room with a subtle aroma of youth and freshness. As she curtsied, with a respectful curiosity brightening her eyes, I noticed almost with a thrill that there was no paint on her cheeks and that there was almost the happiness of modesty in her bearing.

"Tell M. Martin," said the Graf, promptly, "where Kätchen is."

"She is at Warsaw," she replied quietly, "where she hopes, I know, to receive M. Martin."

The girl and I continued to survey one another. "Will you also tell me," I asked, "what you are doing at Dresden?"

"I am woman," the girl answered simply, "to the Princess Rapierska, who is now at Warsaw."

"Elsa," said the Graf, playfully patting her cheek, while I pondered on this answer, "is a good child, she can keep a secret, if necessary."

"I trust," I remarked, looking her full in the face, "that Fräulein Elsa believes that I, too, can keep a secret." Whereat she dropped her eyes and laughed softly.

"Pfui!" said the Graf, raising his eyebrows. "You must not call her Fräulein Elsa. Look at her hand, man."

A wedding ring gleamed on her finger, and my consternation set the Graf chuckling with delight.

"Take care, my bookworm," he added. "Elsa belongs now to Fritz, my faithful Fritz, who can handle a sword nearly as well as I can, and he is jealous of everyone except me, eh, Elsa?"

The girl shook her head. "Fritz," she said, quietly, "will never be jealous of M. Martin, and M. Martin knows, that better than I do."

"I hope," I replied quickly, "that I shall never forget it." And I won the reward of a woman's grateful eyes, which is a pleasant boon to a man fresh from the Königstein.

"Oh! ho!" said the Graf; "and now you shall tell me how you made the acquaintance of this pearl among waiting-women."

"Frau Fritz can tell you, if she pleases," I replied, shortly; "and if she does not please, you can settle it with Fritz himself. I must be off to bed that I may be fit to wait upon the Princess at Warsaw. Good night."

Elsa threw back her head delightedly at my pertness. She glided swiftly to the door and opened it for me. As I passed she suddenly raised her skirt a couple of inches.

"I have learned," she said, with the demurest merriment, "how to put on a woman's slipper, and the Princess, my mistress, says I do it very prettily. May I teach Fritz, M. Martin, how to do it too?"

"You saucy baggage!" I heard the Graf cry, but I do not fancy that either he or Fritz ever learned who taught her that lesson. I went back to my room rejoicing that I was going to Warsaw, and that night I slept the sleep of the free.



CHAPTER II

THE AGENT OF THE KING OF SWEDEN

WE approached Warsaw from a place called Rawa, and thence we traversed a vast plain made all the more vast, melancholy, and deserted by the small clumps of birch and fir, stunted and bleak, scattered here and there haphazard as if to mark with wicked pleasure the sombre loneliness that weltered round us. To dispirited and tired eyes there could not have been a more dispiriting approach to the capital of a mighty kingdom.

And Warsaw itself made me more moody, timid, and irresolute—a city, it seemed, given over for a prey to feudal tyranny, priests, Jews, slaves of boors, and dirt. We passed through the suburb, thick with haughty palaces; through the city proper, whose lordly palaces towered over squalid houses; through filthy streets, where the insolent coaches of the nobles with their fierce retainers, where the weird language, the weird costumes struck at every turn a fresh chill of dismay into my dismayed heart. Fritz guided us to a shabby lane not far from the market place, and hard by the churches of the Nuns of St. Paul and of the Dominicans. Yet what did I care that the Lubomirska palace lay opposite the royal palace; that my window would probably look out towards the Vistula and the suburb of Praga; that I was within reach of ground sacred in the history of Sweden and the Polenstjernas, where Swedish swords had won victories, beneath which Swedes, Brandenburgers, and Poles lay in one common and forgotten grave?

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“ This,” cried the Graf, gaily, “ is Kätchen’s new hostelry. And here is our incomparable hostess herself.”

“ A thousand greetings, Herr Graf,” Kätchen was saying, demurely ; “ a thousand greetings, M. Martin.”

Luckily I had the Graf to chatter gallantly for me. Kätchen looked so strange. Her Polish furs and square cap, the Königstein, and the terrible journey from Dresden had turned me again into the raw bumpkin of the study ; and as I crossed the dirty threshold a mysterious feeling overwhelmed me, the feeling that in this woman’s hands my—all our fates lay. But once in the dingy parlour I recovered, for Kätchen flung off her long mantle and lo ! in a trice we had stepped from Warsaw into “ The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg.” Ah ! this was the Kätchen I had known, a Kätchen with shameless pleated bodice and rich orange-coloured petticoat, red hair, and ivory elephant on her breast, which pointed to secrets unfathomable in her shameless eyes. But it did not set me at my ease that she came forward and most respectfully kissed my hand, though the tempestuous whirl with which she there and then dismissed me from the conversation was even more humiliating.

What a strange meal that first meal in Warsaw was ! Not one word did she and the Graf exchange, and they babbled for the most part in Polish. Yet when I strove to make my escape, she stretched out an imperious hand and pushed me back into my seat. “ There is news for you both,” she said, sharply. “ The Prince Lubomirska is dead.”

“ Then the Princess,” the Graf remarked, with a chuckle, “ is done for. The Prince, you see,” he explained, “ was commander of the crown army, and the Princess will now be no longer necessary. It will have to be the good lady of the new commander whom our master must——”

“ There is worse news than that,” Kätchen interrupted, grimly. “ A couple of weeks ago we heard that the Muscovites had cut a body of Swedes to pieces in Livonia.”

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"*Du lieber Gott!*" cried the Graf. "The Muscovites! It is impossible! And what of King Charles?"

"He is mad," pronounced Kätchen. "He pays no more attention than if it were a flea-bite. King Charles is half way to Kowno."

"That," explained the Graf, in an aside, "is in Lithuania, not so very far from Warsaw."

"Yes," Kätchen continued, "your Swedish King does not care a snap of the fingers for the Muscovites. He is coming to Warsaw to make peace." She commenced to suck at her elephant. We could guess what sort of peace that would be.

The Graf filled our glasses. "Here is to peace!" he exclaimed, gaily. "And you can drink to a Swedish husband for our hostess here, perhaps the Provost Marshal, eh?"

"You shall not drink that toast," Kätchen cried in anger, and she added a sentence in Polish which caused the Graf to shiver his glass in astonished vexation.

"*Mon ami*," he addressed me, "prepare yourself. The agent of the King of Sweden is already here and at your service."

"Good!" I surprised them both, by saying sharply. "I will see him at once."

A flash of approval still gleamed in Kätchen's eyes as she stopped in the passage. "The Princess and I are in your hands," she whispered. "Above all, keep cool."

I nodded. A surprising alertness had seized me. Through that closed door lay the road to freedom; and I would have faced the Devil at that moment, or my Lord Bengt.

She opened the door slowly, mysterious roguery in her curtsy. "Herr Graf," she cried, "the messenger from the King of Poland begs to wait upon you."

The panelled room was lighted only by the glow of the fire and two flickering candles. As I entered, a dark figure in a cloak was bowing with stately politeness, the flickering candles cast their shadows over both of us—and then we

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both stepped back in an uncontrollable spasm of surprise. Good God! I was face to face, not with the Devil, but with worse—with my Lord Bengt! and he was face to face with M. Martin! The candles flickered for three tremendous minutes.

“M. Martin!” he said, in a strange, deep voice. “It is M. Martin!”

“Yes, Herr Grefve, it is M. Martin.”

The candles flickered yet another three minutes.

“They told me you were dead,” he said, and he slowly wiped his brow.

“I was dead, but a few weeks ago they allowed me to live again.”

“Whence, then, do you come?” he demanded, abruptly.

“From the Königstein, my Lord.”

A faint smile curled his thin lips. “Ah! I congratulate you, M. Martin.” He seized one of the candles and came close up to me, throwing the light full on my face. I was too paralysed to move. Two years had suddenly rolled away, and I was saying adieu to my Lady and himself in the hall of Polenstjerna Castle and behind them stood a dead man—my Lord Karl.

“Yes,” he said, in that strange, deep voice, as he put the candle slowly down. “Yes, you have been in the Königstein.”

He walked back to the fire and stood staring at the glowing logs. At first I thought he had not altered one whit; but a close look revealed, in the thin, sallow face with the strong, passionless resolution in chin and jaw, and the dark, clear, passionless eyes that I knew so well, two years of ceaseless trouble, thought, and danger; there were lines about the mouth cut deep, and over his left temple was a long scar. I noticed, too, that beneath his cloak his left arm was bandaged, and he supported it by a silk handkerchief tied about his neck.

“I understand your feelings,” he said, at last, “for I, too,

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am a prisoner." His eyes gleamed for a moment and then the gleam died out suddenly like a match in the dark.

"You, Herr Grefve! a prisoner!"

He waved his left arm gently. "It was after we crossed the Düna," he explained. "I was out on a reconnaissance, and we found ourselves surrounded by the Oginskis. We had a warm skirmish, and I was left for dead, one sabre-cut over my head and two through this arm. I suppose being able to talk Polish saved my throat. Anyway I escaped not only the Jews' knives, but the surgeons', too, and here I am, a prisoner, when all my friends look upon me as dead. It is wonderful, is it not?"

It was. Under God's guidance he and I were destined to baffle the fate of ordinary men and to justify the mystery of God's rule in this world of ours.

"And I can serve my country better, perhaps," he added, coolly, "in Warsaw than if I still had the honour to be a captain in his Majesty's Trabants."

I could not take my eyes off him. The old fascination had cast its spell upon me. Yes, this was the Bengt whom I had admired and feared in those days now so far away.

"You are aware, I suppose," he began, quietly, "what is to be your business here——"

"They do not tell you much in the Königstein."

"Then I must explain. Briefly this is the state of affairs: The Swedish army and the King have crossed the border and are advancing slowly, but surely. Lithuania in its heart is for the Czar, Poland for my master. The Polish King is cowed, and is offering terms. He sent a cast-off mistress, a wanton of the wantons,—a Swede, I blush to say,—the Countess of Königsmark, with that message. Pah! it was madness. To send a Swedish wanton to my master! And now that she has failed, his Majesty must needs despatch one of his favourites, the Graf von Vitzthum, to offer peace. But the gentleman is no better than the lady, rather



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worse. Mark my words, my master will not listen to him——”

“But why not, Herr Grefve?” I interrupted, in despair.

“You must first understand,” he replied, gently, “that there are three great obstacles to peace. To begin with, we have the Poles. Good heavens!” he burst out, “they are mad, these Poles. While their country is rushing to ruin, they are as unstable as water and as vain as the vainest woman who ever disgraced her sex. They cry out in the same breath for King Charles and for King Augustus. The Diet was here, and all it could do was to brawl and whine about sending a wretched deputation to my master. No, we must leave the Poles to their vanity and folly, for they will not awake until they are ruined.”

“And the second obstacle?” I inquired.

“We Swedes,” he answered, gravely, “hate the Muscovite, but we do not fear him without allies. We have thrashed him before and we will thrash him again. You may take it that if Muscovite gold and Muscovite lies cannot keep the alliance between the King of Poland and the Czar, the Muscovite is done for. Peace is ruin to the Muscovite. My work, then, is to balk the Muscovite.”

I drew a deep breath. “And the third obstacle?” I muttered.

“The third,” he replied, as if he were telling me the time of day, “the third is my master, the King of Sweden.”

There was no need to say more to a man who had stood in King Charles’s presence and looked into his eyes.

“The Swedish Ministers,” he proceeded, “the King of Poland, the Kings of France and England, are urgent for peace. Since I have been a prisoner I have worked secretly in that cause. The time has now come when, if ever, something decisive must be done——”

“Then,” I interrupted, boldly, “you are not here at the bidding of the King of Sweden?”

“No,” he answered, frankly, “I am the agent of Sweden

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and her Ministers, not of my master, the King. His Majesty is bent on driving Augustus of Poland from his throne. Ah! M. Martin, revenge is a sorry thing——”

“But if it is only punishment?” I interrupted, quickly.

He smiled compassionately. “Is it not always a pity,” he asked, “when a man allows his passions to conquer his reason? and when that man is a king it is ruin, always ruin. The real enemy of Sweden is the Muscovite. We Swedes cannot fight both the Czar and the King of Poland; clearly, then, we must make peace with Poland that we may teach these insolent Muscovites the lesson that we have to teach them every fifty years.”

“So we are to make peace, leaving Poland to its King?”

“You hit the mark precisely. But we propose to let my master satisfy his desire for revenge—I beg your pardon, for punishment—at Moscow. And, once there is no Czar, Poland will be at his mercy.”

How easy and simple it sounded! “But supposing that the obstacles cannot be overcome?” I suggested, timidly.

“Nothing, M. Martin, is impossible to the man who masters his passions and takes trouble. And remember we, you and I, must, yes, *must* win; therefore we shall.”

His words and simple air were more inspiring far than the rich Hungarian wine Kätchen had given us at supper. I pined to begin, for I snuffed freedom and its gifts at the end of the road.

“And what are we to do?” I inquired, eagerly.

“Peace,” my Lord answered, “you understand, can only be made at Warsaw. The Pole must be taught that alliance with the Czar is ruin. Your work and mine, then, is to break the neck of the Muscovite agent here in Warsaw.”

The sudden passion in his voice startled me. “The Muscovite agent?” I stammered.

“Yes,” he answered, “Patkul is his name, a doubly damnable traitor. If we do not crush him he will crush us.”

I sprang up in great excitement. Bengt put a soothing

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hand on my arm. "Permit me," he said, calmly, "to finish what I was saying. I have been working for peace, and all is ready now. That is why I asked for a trusty agent, and the King of Poland has given me the best possible—M. Martin. I am ready to trust you fully, but are you ready to trust me?" He held out his hand deliberately. What was I to do? I sat still in the greatest confusion and shame.

"My Lord," I faltered, at last, "it pains me to offend you, but the last two years have taught me that I can trust no man, not even myself."

"I know what you are thinking," he pursued, in the same calm voice; nay, he suddenly put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my face. "You believe that it was I who had you flung into the Königstein."

"I never said I believed it," I protested, feebly.

"Oh, no! you are too polite to admit it, and too honest to deny. What would you say if I were to tell you that it was a woman who did this thing? You cannot punish a woman, M. Martin."

"A woman!" The unhallowed bitterness in his voice stabbed me through and through. I caught at his hand in a paroxysm of awful fear.

"It was," he pronounced grimly, "the Fru Countess, my aunt, the Fru Countess Polenstjerna."

"Ah!" The horror of it, the unspeakable horror of it! He must be lying in his throat.

"Yes, M. Martin, it is the truth. In those days when all began to go wrong with my aunt's schemes she thought you were the cause, and she denounced you as a spy and a traitor to the men in authority at Dresden, and she died before she could undo her work. And I would God," he added brokenly, "that that was all the mischief that Polish woman had done."

He turned away shaken with emotion, but I was in no condition to heed him. The wings of the Angel of Death had passed into the room and encompassed me round about.

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I could see only the hall at Polenstjerna and that miserable mother reaping in her grey hairs the fruits of a woman's ambition; I could hear only the cry when I saved her honour, when God, whose eyes are upon the truth, had struck her down with the agony of silence and had swiftly summoned her to His judgment seat, pardoned, indeed, by the man whom she had wronged, but not permitted to ask his pardon.

My Lord touched me gently. "Will you help me, M. Martin?" he asked, and his eyes were moist with tears that I could not understand.

"I am here to do your bidding," I replied.

"Good! I must not ask for more at present. In a very few days I shall be able to give you precise instructions. Till then keep in your chamber and practise with your sword. Do not forget, the King is helpless and this dirty town is full of spies, full of the cut-throats and roystering braggarts who call themselves soldiers. So be wary."

He flung on his cloak. "Do you remember the Graf von Waldschlösschen?" he demanded, suddenly, in the doorway. "Ah! I see you remember our slippery Saxon. Be on your guard, particularly, against him. He is in the pay of the Muscovites."

"What?" I almost shouted.

"Hush! He and his friends will try to seduce you. But I believe you to be a friend to Sweden—"

"Yes," I interrupted, eagerly, "I can swear I am a friend to Sweden."

"Then we shall prosper. Adieu!"

He had glided from the room before I could utter one syllable of all the questions in my heart. As I sat down by the dying fire, crushed and impotent, I could only feel I was in the toils once more—could feel the meshes of the Devil cutting into my flesh.

Nor did I see a soul till next morning when the Graf himself brought me my chocolate, and while I drank it he plied me with questions. What a rollicking humour he was in!

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and he giggled like a maid of twelve at my replies. Not even Bengt's solemn denial about the Königstein could make him serious.

"Perhaps he is right, perhaps he is right," was all he would say.

"But I thought you knew——"

"No, I only know this, that it was not the Fru Countess who had *me* sent to that accursed prison."

"And are you in the pay of the Muscovites?"

"Do not ask impertinent questions. You had better take my Lord's advice and have a fencing lesson."

Bah! the humiliation I had to endure was worse than it had been at Polenstjerna. The Graf's wrist was as supple, his body as lithe, his eye as true, as even he could have desired.

"Fiddlededee!" he said, cheerfully, to my despairing groans. "If you would only think a little more of *finesse*, and less of plunging at my vitals. That is why you Englishmen never make first-rate swordsmen. You needs must seize your man by the nose, and bring him to his knees with the first blow, and then you are surprised that he spits you. *Finesse* is everything, everything. *Diantre!* without *finesse* in fencing, in diplomacy, and in love, a man is no better than a noble calf. So pray for *finesse*, my bookworm."

I watched him while he held his sword to the light with the prettiest gesture of bravado, and let the watery sun dance in rainbows along its glittering edge. "Ha, ha!" he chuckled, "in this game of peace and love, it is *finesse* against *finesse*, and the Devil alone knows who will win. But put on your clothes, there is something for you to see downstairs."

He left me carolling like a lark in an English meadow in springtime. I found him presently in the parlour, sipping a glass of wine and still carolling as he pirouetted up and down. Kissing his hand to me, he marched up to a cupboard, whence he pulled out two long wrappers and a couple of *masks*.

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“Ta-ra-la!” he hummed. “You will look quite ravishing in these, eh?”

“What are they?”

“Masks and dominos, *mon ami*. Are they not pretty? Fal-la-la!” He capered hither and thither, dangling the dominos at arm’s length. “You are going to wear one,” he sang, “and I am going to wear the other. His Eminence the Cardinal gives a masked ball to-night, bless his gay, deceiving heart! and all the wicked world of Warsaw will be there, and so will you and I, to see the fun. Fal-la-la!” He popped on one of the masks and peered at me so naughtily that I cried with laughing.

“A ball!” I said, at last, “when the King of Sweden is at Kowno! Are they mad?”

“Why not a ball? A man fights better when he is gay, and his Eminence particularly desires to please his Majesty just now. *Potztausend!* a masked ball is the finest device that ever was devised for stealing a woman’s heart, and your Pole is the very sweetest devil for mischief when she knows that she cannot be found out. Fal-la-la! Fal-la-la!” And up and down he pirouetted, bowing and scraping, capering and jigging, as if nothing but naughty Polish women need occupy a man’s thoughts.

By-and-by he tossed the dominos on one side. “Do you remember,” he began, slowly, “King Eric’s Tower and a roguish young baggage of a wench at Polenstjerna——?”

“What! Greta?” I was quivering with a nameless fear.

He slapped his thigh. “That’s the name. Confound it! Why did I not recall it just now? Well, I saw her not so very long ago.” He tossed off a glass of wine and smacked his lips.

“You are dreaming,” I said, with a mighty scorn. “Greta is hundreds of miles away.”

“Confound your impudence! Do you suppose I do not know one girl from another? I saw her, I tell you, and she

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is prettier than ever and plumper, too. After all, give me the fair-haired Swede ; she is worth five of your Polish brunettes. The captivating little baggage! *Allmächtiger!* it is something to be free !

He slapped his thigh again and broke into a roystering catch.

The sluices in my mind broke and one vast tide of irresistible passionate memories deluged my brain. " Did you speak to her ? " I asked, quivering with excitement.

" My dear good bookworm, what do you suppose ? Of course I spoke to her. She is in the household of the Princess Rapierska."

My Lady's cousin ! My heart was thumping as if it would burst.

" And—" I began, and choked.

" No, not one syllable, not one syllable, upon my honour, of the Fröken Countess. But she told me of the ball and desired me, with the prettiest blush in the world, to bring her humble services to M. Martin, who does not deserve them. Did I not tell you, my bookworm, that the wenches would make——"

" Go on, Graf."

" And I went to the first damned Jew I could find and bought these dominos. Fal-la-la ! " He commenced to caper again. "*Mein Liebchen hat ein Rosenmund,*" he sang gaily.

" For God's sake ! Graf," I implored, " tell me all you know."

But he paid no heed. " Do you see that ribbon ? " he asked, holding up a bow at the throat of one of the dominos. " Blue and yellow are the Swedish colours. I am surprised that you have forgotten it. If M. Martin does not wear the blue and yellow, why, then the Graf von Waldschlösschen will." He transferred his finger from the bow to his nose with incomparable roguery. " I will wager my reputation that the man who wears that domino to-night will learn

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something worth learning. It is a pity you are not going to his Eminence's ball."

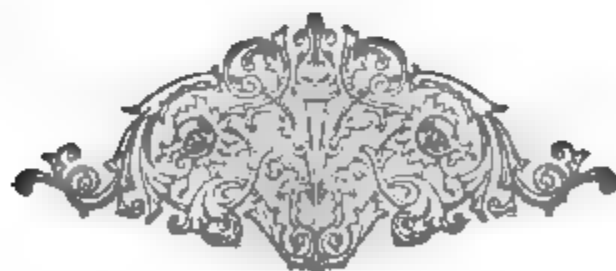
"Indeed I am," I replied, "if I have to fight you for the domino and the blue and yellow bow."

"I might say," he retorted, "you are as shifty as a woman or a weathercock, but I do not. I am simply rejoiced. The Königstein has not unmanned you, after all. We shall get some decent work out of you now. A man to whom thick ankles are the same as thin, a man who does not know brown hair from——"

"Will the Princess Rapierska be at the ball?" I interrupted.

"I do not know, nor do I care. I am going to look for Kätchen. Adieu!" he cried. And off he went, humming his ridiculous tunes.

"*Mein Liebchen hat ein Rosenmund*" rang in my ears for some minutes. But I no longer felt a desire to sing. Greta and the blue and yellow bow had stirred in me a wondrous yearning. Yet even that was quenched by the cruel question, Did my Lord Bengt, who had just returned to Warsaw, know that Greta was here in this accursed city? And if he did, what then?





CHAPTER III

THE MASKED BALL OF HIS EMINENCE

THAT afternoon I was permitted, under the Graf's guidance, to soar still higher into the mysterious realms of high policy, and to comfort myself with the reflection that I was not the only person in Warsaw who could not see his way clearly. The whole of Poland was in an uproar ; Warsaw rang with one helpless cry of treachery, the cry of a nation doomed to perish. In Lithuania the Sapiehas and the Oginskis were engaged in a blood-feud to the death ; the King of Sweden had boldly espoused the cause of the Sapiehas, and the Oginskis had appealed to the King of Poland. To listen to that appeal meant war to the death with King Charles. A great Diet had been summoned, and the nobles had flocked to Warsaw in swarms to wrangle and quarrel, even to spill blood in the streets. One half called the other half traitors for aiding the Sapiehas and their allies, the Swedes ; the other half replied, denouncing as worse than traitors the King and his faction, who had plunged an innocent kingdom into war against their will and against all laws of God and man. Some demanded the deposition of the King ; some, war with the false Swede ; some, peace at all cost ; some, that the Saxon troops should be expelled ; some, that more Saxon troops should be summoned. They all cursed the Swede, the Muscovite, the Saxon ; they cursed the King and the Cardinal, the senators and the castellans, the *bishops*, the Jews, the Protestant heretics at Thorn and

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Danzig. And while they wrangled and cursed, King Charles was moving forward, ever forward, nearer and nearer to Warsaw, in defiance of half-frozen rivers, trackless forests, roads feet deep in melting snow and liquid mud, regardless of the buzzing swarms of Muscovite and Lithuanian, driving the partisans of Augustus the Strong before him like chaff. Every day the nobles were drifting, drifting away from Warsaw, some to their homes in sullen despair, some openly to the Swedish camp, some to plunder and ravage with Sapieha or Oginski, or with the Muscovite in Livonia. Every day arrived fresh coaches, fresh hordes of scimitared, shaven-headed horsemen, the cavalry that not so long ago, under the great Sobieski, had routed the Turk at Vienna and saved Christendom. One passionate cry wrung from a nation's heart went up: "If only we had a King like Sobieski now!" Every day there was a fresh panic, and every evening brought with it fresh and mocking comfort. Men shook their heads over the Cardinal. He was in correspondence with the Swedes; he was meditating treachery; he had quarrelled with his Excellency General von Fleming, he had rebuked his Majesty's morals and denounced his policy; he had an intrigue with the crown army under Prince Jablonowski, he would seduce the troops to the side of the Swede, go over himself, and demand the deposition of the King and a new election; his mistress was in the pay of Count Piper, and he would repeat what he and his niece had done at the last election.

The wildest stories passed from mouth to mouth. The Muscovites had been defeated again, their money was at an end, the Czar was suing for peace, and meanwhile locust flights of Tartars and Cossacks were doing the Devil's work in Lithuania and Livonia, burning, ravishing, sacking, friend and foe alike. Others swore that the news was of the best: the Muscovites were victorious; General Patkul had received two couriers and was intoxicated with joy that Riga had fallen into the Czar's hands. But Saxon and Pole shivered.

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Stories were stories, but all were agreed that King Charles daily marched nearer to Warsaw. Unless he could be stopped those terrible men from the ice-bound North in their blue coats and sheepskins would be pouring into Warsaw, and from Warsaw they would stream westward into the fat Saxon land, and wreak the vengeance of the starved North on the farms and cattle, the wives and daughters, of the subjects of the King who had perjured himself in time of peace. It was whispered that the Swedish King was bartering with the new King of Prussia, and before long Prussians and Swedes, greedy for the spoil of Danzig and Thorn, would be ravaging the land along the Vistula as in the days of Charles Gustavus, and that the dregs of Lutheranism, flown with heresy and wine, would be desecrating the shrines of the saints who were powerless to save. A muddy messenger with bloody spurs had arrived from Berlin with the blackest tidings: the Swedish troops in Pomerania had already been ordered to break up and unite with the Brandenburgers on the road from Königsberg. Peace must be made while the enemy was yet in the way. Why had the deputation not started? There was treachery in the delay, treachery if they went, for they would assuredly be bought with Swedish gold to betray their land. The French ambassador, and the Envoy of Cæsarian Majesty at Vienna and the Envoy of England were tugging at the skirts of the King of Poland, threatening, cajoling, imploring for peace. His Catholic Majesty at Paris had thrown down the gauntlet to the allied Powers, and unless the Saxon troops were to fight with Hessians and Brandenburgers, the men of Brunswick and of Cassel, with the Dutch and the English from Basel and Breisach to Luxembourg and Antwerp, the French marshals and the lilies of the Roi Soleil would beat their insolent, bloody, burning paths down the pleasant valleys of the Main and the Neckar, and into the fair campaign of Franconia till they knocked, as the Gauls of old, at the gates of Cæsar and the princes and electors of the Empire.

Men strained their eyes for help and a sign, and there

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was no help, and no sign. Denmark was girdled by the fleets of the Sea Powers and dared not stir; the Turk had made his peace with the Czar, and the friendship of his scimitar was more to be feared than its edge. The Russian promised, as Sennacherib, horses, if so be that you could put riders upon them, but the Muscovite was as the King of Egypt, a reed which, if a man leaned upon it, would run into his hand. The Saxon treasury was empty, the Saxon troops were ill-drilled and ill-fed, their officers swashbucklers who spent their days brawling in wine taverns and their nights in chambering and wantonness; the crown army would not fight without pay, and the pay was sucked up by the mistresses of the King and the sycophants of the Court. The red glare of the Swedish camp-fires had been seen at Kowno, and strange Finnish horsemen were scouring the land. These were the men sprung from the loins of those who had swept Germany like a murrain in the days of Gustavus Adolphus, from the men who had crossed the Belt in the depth of winter and, one against ten, had fought on the plains of Warsaw till the stream had run with blood and the Vistula had been choked with the dead and the dying; nay, they were the very men who but yesterday had strode over The Sound in the face of the Danish fleet, who had laughed at the snows of Ingrelia, had captured twenty thousand Muscovites at Narva, and had scattered the chivalry of Poland and Saxony on the banks of the Düna; men who knew nothing of the taverns of Dresden, of wine and fowls and white bread, humble peasants from the bleak uplands of Dalecarlia and the forests of Finland, who believed in their land and their King, and believed, above all, in the Lord God of Hosts as the God of Sweden.

Beneath the turmoil and the fever of fear, defeat, and ruin, burrowed his Excellency and his Excellency's spies; there burrowed princes and princesses, senators and castellans, gentlemen ushers and waiting-wenchies, men without hearts

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and women without shame ; there burrowed the Graf, General Patkul, and my Lord Bengt.

There was a lull, the Graf wound up. News had come that the Swedish King had mysteriously disappeared ; it was a favourite trick of his, and in his absence his Ministers and generals were stealthily and earnestly striving for peace. The Graf von Vitzthum had set out with a letter written by Augustus himself, and the Muscovites were in despair. For if at the eleventh hour King Charles listened to reason, the Muscovite must face the Swede alone. And meanwhile we were going to dance in masks and dominos at the palace of his Eminence. What a strange, mad, wicked world it was! Surely the earth would open and swallow us all.

A weird scene it was this night for eyes dulled by a cell in the Königstein. The Cardinal's palace was ablaze with candles and flambeaux, and great bunches of pine torches flared in the courtyard above the tar barrels and the fire. In the corridors and the salon where we should dance the quality were as thick as bees when spring stirs them to swarm. Everywhere men and women, masked, and in dominos of every colour, pink, blue, yellow, red, green, scarlet, crimson, and orange, some with curious heraldic devices, some with lover's knots, some silk, some plain, thick and thin, long and short; and beneath the dazzling maze of colour I could catch the sheen of satin and silken petticoat, the glimmer of dainty feet and jewelled slipper, the scabbard of sword and scimitar, could hear the clinking music of spurs. There was no dancing as yet, for his Majesty and his Eminence were still at supper. Tongues wagged gaily ; to-morrow there might be war, but to-night belonged to love and peace. Hark ! what was that ? A fanfare of trumpets almost drowning the sullen thunder of the drums. And here is his Majesty at last, leaning on the arm of our host, the Cardinal. His Eminence is in his full Cardinal's robes, his train borne by pages, his mitre and his crozier as Archbishop and Primate of Poland carried before him, and a perfect suite of eccle-

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siastics and the gentlemen of his household about him. How agreeable he looked, with his long, well-shaped nose, his full-lipped mouth, comfortable chin and jowl, and bright eyes, not the face or the deportment of an intriguer, but of a noble prince of the Church, a man of the world, who found that world good and fair! Was that really Augustus the Strong? Yes, beneath his jewelled fur cap smiled the swarthy brows and the gleaming dark eyes; beneath the gorgeous jewelled fur cloak glittered the blue ribbon across his corselet, and there dangled from it the Order of the White Elephant. A subdued roar of applause greeted the King of the nation in the nation's dress. For a minute his Majesty stood smiling and bowing with a Titan's grace to the masked welcome of his subjects, and then he accompanied his Primate to the dais, where chairs were set for them beneath the terrible Polish Eagle emblazoned on the wall.

The King withdrew; he would return to revel with the best of us, but the Cardinal sat on the dais alone, watching the puppets at their play in brooding thought. Down here in the swirling, laughing, babbling crowd was his niece, from whose hands the reins of power had slipped for ever; down here, amongst the men and women who had so meekly kissed his ring, were those who hated him, feared him, intrigued and plotted against him; down here was the King whom he had made, and whom he could now unmake; and away out there in the forests of Lithuania was the Swedish heretic King to whom, at twenty years of age, women and balls had come to be as the sin of witchcraft. What would he do? Men and women were asking that question here, and at Versailles, and at St. James's in my native land, nay, he was asking it himself, I felt sure. What would he do? And till he decided we, poor fools, must revel in domino and mask.

They were dancing a Polish dance with an abandon and a grace that stirred the blood. If I could only have forgotten



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that Greta was in Warsaw, I, too, under the intoxication of that music could have tripped the memory of the Königstein out of my blood. Instead I watched; and love, that played about me in a whirl of drapery and a flutter of fans, played in vain.

An hour or more slipped by, and nothing happened. My blue and yellow ribbons might have been purple and red for all they brought me. I leaned my head wearily against the festooned pillar and dreamed of Polenstjerna and the White Countess, of the Terrace where I had learned to hate the Muscovite.

A faint tug at my domino. In front of me was a lady in a pink silk domino, with blue ribbons at her throat and a fur cap on her powdered head.

"Monsieur Martin," she whispered.

"Are you sure you are speaking to M. Martin?" I stammered.

"Everyone in Warsaw knows M. Martin, the prisoner of the Königstein," was the quiet reply, and the unknown laughed softly.

"And everyone who has been in Dresden," I replied, boldly, "knows the Princess Rapierska." There was no mistaking the delicate lisp of the Dresden Court.

"*Eh bien! nous verrons,*" the Princess answered. She beckoned me with her fan to follow her, and we threaded our way through the labyrinth of dancers. "Through that door," she murmured, "there is a passage. Will M. Martin be good enough to endure his ennui till one o'clock, three hours and more,"—she counted them on her fingers,— "and then find his way thither and then——"

She dropped a sly curtsy, saying rapidly in Swedish, "We shall meet again, perhaps; meanwhile, I have the honour to wish M. Martin a pleasant evening." And she was lost in the whirling crowd.

The blood boiled in my head. The Princess's Swedish was of the best and purest, and not a trace of Polish

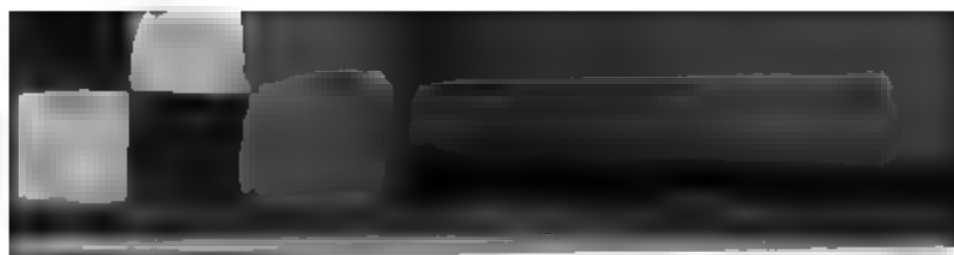
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accent in it. Could I have been mistaken? No, it was impossible.

I plunged into the maze and pressed hither and thither. Pink silk dominos by the score, but the one pink silk worn by a woman in a fur cap and powdered hair was not to be found. It had vanished as a ghost in the night. In despair I sought the Graf. But he was too busy to do more than listen impatiently and murmur a promise to join me at one o'clock.

I returned to my pillar. How I hated this wicked ball! What I did I do not know, but I have a dim recollection of dancing once, and of a long conversation held with I do not know whom, and next day I found in my pocket a piece of red ribbon which did not belong to myself. Not the rack could have made me remember how it came into my possession.

But as midnight drew on I observed that the space in front of the dais had gradually become clear and in it had gathered a little knot of dominos who were left to themselves. When at last the iron tongues of the church clocks proclaimed twelve o'clock a trumpet rang out. It was the signal to unmask, and in five minutes we were all staring stupidly at each other. The dominos followed the masks. A tempestuous flutter, a mighty confusion of waving colours, the gurgle of excited laughter, and, then as if by an enchanter's wand, the hall was full of Polish princesses blazing with jewels, Saxon countesses flaunting their finery, the great officials of the household, senators, castellans, and vavodes, nobles in shaven heads and nobles in satin coats and silk stockings, the actresses of his Majesty's French company of players, the ladies who had husbands and the ladies who had none; and in and around the bright eyes and the sparkling arms and bosoms wound the rake and the statesman from Dresden, the beaux of the salons of the *Maitresse régnante*, the feudal magnate from the marshes of the Minsk and the plains of the Ukraine, the officers of the *garde du*



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corps in scarlet and silver, and the mustachioed adventurer who had fought under Prince Eugène and had left the sunny South to revel in the plunder and the caresses of the frozen North.

I gazed eagerly at the space in front of the dais, and tottered against my pillar. In that tiny circle were his Majesty and the Princess Rapierska, the Princess Lubomirska and his Excellency, and General Patkul, with Riga in his eyes, and others whom I did not know, but there—I grasped the pillar to be sure I was not drunk or dreaming—there—there, curtseying to his Majesty, Great God! there—was my Lady, my Lady the Fröken Countess Polenstjerna! It was she! dressed in the purest white satin, her golden hair glittering in the flare of the flambeaux, her blue eyes blazing as the Pole star on a frosty night. Her proud, virginal loveliness, as God and the air of Sweden had made it, quenched the ripe beauty of the princesses beside her as the sun will quench a candle. Two years had made my girl-mistress a woman, — I caught my breath, — and she was here a queen. And his Majesty knew it, — I ground my teeth, — and all Poland and Saxony knew it, too. Her name, my Lady's name, was on their vile lips. Ah! God! that it should be so! I clenched my fists. Dear God! that it should be so!

The King was bowing over her hand, he was looking into her eyes, he raised her hand, the hand that I had wet with my tears at Polenstjerna. And I cried from my heart, "If peace means that, — *that*, — then there shall be no peace, but such war as shall punish the wicked and purge the land of its abominations. Warsaw shall become a heap of stones, and we Swedes, to whom God has given to smite with the edge of the sword, will drive Augustus the Strong and his wantons from the throne, and harry his land till he be a prince no more and till he howl in the outcast's sackcloth and ashes for the mercy that he shall not find."

My eye fell upon my Lord Bengt amongst the crowd.

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His fingers had crept to his sword-hilt and there blazed in his face that which made me shiver with joy. "Take care, sire," I read, "take care! when the cup of your iniquity is full you will deal with me, with *me*, Bengt Polenstjerna." Ah! there might be no peace brought by my Lord Bengt. Instead, King Charles's Trabants would ride into Warsaw, and the Vistula might again be swollen with the blood of the slain, as it had been the last time that a Polenstjerna spoke in the gates with a King of Poland.

They were dancing a most lovely minuet. And if old Prynne, whose *Histrio-mastix* I had sucked in with my mother's milk, could have seen my Lady dance in that minuet he would have forgiven me for adoring her. The Muses were in her feet and the Graces in her eyes, and when she sank back in the final salutation to her partner, the King, a loud hum of applause broke from the crowded hall. His Majesty faced his Court; a page brought him a goblet on bended knee. He raised the toast in his giant arms, crying, "*Vivat Respublica Poloniae!*" And then, inspired, he drew his sword and waved it on high.

An answering roar shot up that made the rafters ring and drowned the trumpets and drums that had sounded his toast and his challenge. For ten seconds a solemn stillness, and then, as the "*Vivat Respublica Poloniae!*" thundered out a second time, every sword leaped responsive from its scabbard and scattered myriad halos athwart the flare of torch and flambeaux. And under that canopy of naked steel my Lady, led by his Majesty, passed out to supper.

Something brushed at my sleeve. It was my Lord Bengt. He bowed, stopped as if he would speak, bowed again, and strode out. I was cold all over. Never have I seen anything so terrible as his face, so terrible because it was so calm. God help King Augustus and Poland!

The lackeys came streaming in with wine and cakes, and I ate and drank with the rest. Indeed, I could have drunk till I was fuddled, and to save myself I slipped away to the

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passage spoken of by the Princess Rapierska. It was a long corridor lighted by one dim lantern, and the door at the other end was locked.

"*Herr Jesus!*" the Graf muttered, in a thick voice, as he glided in. "What the devil does it mean?"

"You did not know that *she* was in Warsaw?"

"No, no," he replied, with passion. "My friend, we have put our necks into Satan's own noose. God alone knows what will happen now."

The sounds of revelry, of laughter, and tripping feet without, began to die away.

"Curse it!" the Graf growled, "I cannot wait much longer. I must be away by three o'clock, and so must you."

"Why?"

"Never mind," he snarled. "You have enough to think about at present," which was true enough.

At last the door at the other end opened and two women appeared. One of the dominos let her mask drop. The Princess Rapierska stood revealed.

"Has M. Martin forgotten *Polenstjerna*?" the other domino, a pink silk one, asked sadly.

I dropped on my knee with a sob. "My Lady!" I cried. "Fröken Grefvinna!"

The Graf was bowing with the most frigid politeness. "M. Martin," he said, with his haughtiest air, "when your business with these ladies is finished, you will find me in the courtyard."

My Lady gave him a salutation as icy as his own. Their eyes met, and hers were full of righteous anger at a traitor who had once polluted her castle with his presence.

"Herr Graf—" stammered the Princess, but he cut her short with a freezing bow, and disappeared.

Angry spots of colour stood in the Princess's cheeks. Then she whispered to my Lady rapidly, and withdrew.

"For God's sake!" I cried, "tell me, Fröken Grefvinna, *why* you are here——"

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"You must not call me Grefvinna," she interrupted, gently. "There is no such person now. There is only Fröken Polenstjerna, and she is here in Warsaw with the enemies of Sweden."

I could only look at her in abject terror.

"After you were gone," she explained, "they searched at Polenstjerna and—and they found terrible papers—letters—and someone had signed my name. The letters were about me and only me, and—and—I had to fly, and I fled to my cousin's here in Poland. They have taken away my castle and my lands ; they have taken away my title, and if Fröken Polenstjerna returns to Sweden, they will hang her as a traitress to her land."

I had longed to plunge my sword into one king ; I longed now to plunge it into the heart of another.

"You must not call me Grefvinna any more," she said, a dry sob in her throat. "Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna is dead."

"No," I protested, passionately. "No ! never ! I will call you Fröken Grefvinna till I die."

A faint smile floated into her weary face. Fröken Polenstjerna forsooth ! She believed, as I believed, that no king could make her that.

"And who was it that did this deed of shame ?" I asked, fiercely.

"Do not ask," she replied, "oh ! do not ask !"

"Was it," I said, beside myself, "my Lord Bengt ?"

"Bengt !" A stab of pain went through her. "Bengt ! M. Martin ! when will you learn to be just ? Bengt, to whom I owe everything ! Listen ! you shall listen ! It was Bengt who tried to destroy those papers, Bengt who helped me to escape, Bengt whom alone the inquiry proved to be stainless."

"It was, then" I said sternly, "it was the Fru Countess, your aunt."

She bowed her head. "Yes," she whispered, "yes."



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She would punish me. She did it from revenge, and she died before she could undo her work. Ah ! God ! That a woman could do such a thing."

Revenge ! always revenge ! We had reaped in the past the fruits of a mother's ambition ; in the future we must reap the fruits of a mother's revenge.

"And Bengt is just," my Lady cried. "He could now be Lord of Polenstjerna, but he refused and offended the King. For two years he has been fighting for me and the truth. He was the first to land in Denmark, he was among the first in the trenches at Narva, and he saved the King's life there almost at the cost of his own. He led our Polenstjerna horsemen across the Düna. To-day he is in the eyes of all Sweden a hero; a Polenstjerna, thank God ! such as my forefathers were. Be just, my friend. He has sworn to place me free from stain in my beloved castle, and he will keep his oath. I came here to-night to ask you to be just and to help him to make peace. You will ?"

Peace ! and out there was Augustus the Strong.

"Grefvinna, you want peace ?" I asked, grasping at the idea which could save us.

"Yes, yes. I would do my country a service. They think that because I am an outcast I am a Swede no longer. They do not know the heart of a Swedish woman. I was a girl in those days at Polenstjerna. I am a woman now. I can help, and Bengt can help, and you can help. You will ?" She looked into my face, as I wrestled with my thoughts.

"Forgive my rude boldness," I said, doggedly. "I have no right to ask, yet I do ask. Two years ago you loved my Lord Bengt. If you love him still, I will help."

The blood leaped into her cheeks. For a moment, but only a moment, she was angry and silent.

"You are my friend," she said softly, as if she could not trust her voice. "I will answer you. Since I was a child, I have loved him. I am a woman now." She flung her arms

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open and happiness soared into her eyes. "And I love him still. There is no woman who knows him who does not love him, and I love him more than any woman in the whole world can."

The lantern burnt dim. The passage became dark and cold. I listened, with bowed head.

My Lady took a step forward. "Ah ! my friend," she repeated, "I have learned many things in these two years, and I see now that I did wrong in asking you to help. It would be better for you and for me, kinder for me, who honour you, if you would go away and remember only that Ebba Polenstjerna is grateful for what you have done, and is sorry, sorry that she should have been the cause—" Her voice broke ; she laid her hand on my bowed head.

Then I stood up. I could look her in the face now. "No, Grefvinna, M. Martin will remain, if you please. Do not be afraid. I cannot forget the past, nor would I for all that man can give me. But from to-night I swear that no word of mine shall remind you that I have been aught but one in your service, no, not till you give me leave."

"That will never be," she replied, with a quick sob.

"So be it. From to-night M. Martin is your servant,—nothing more,—your servant till death."

The agony was passed now. Once in his life a man must cross the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and in that passage I had tasted the bitterness of death, and God, in His goodness, had brought me through.

The dim lantern burnt bright again. It was for M. Martin to show that the yeoman born can make a duty of love.

"Tell me," I said, quite calm, "who set me free from the Königstein."

She smiled through her tears. "If M. Martin," she drawled, in lisping French, "will ask the Princess Rapirska, he may get an answer."

The mimicry was perfect. With such speed can poor fools of men and women forget they are made of wretched clay.



CHAPTER IV

A LADY'S SHOE AND THE WRIST OF COUNT BENGTT

ONCE in the inn parlour the Graf stepped up to a faded print of his Polish Majesty, and drew from behind the dirty frame a slip of paper which he deciphered with the greatest avidity. "We have still half an hour," he remarked, with mysterious briskness, as he lighted his long pipe.

"May I ask you something?" I asked, timidly.

"I can guess what you would ask," he replied, smiling. "You have promised to help the lady whom they call here Mademoiselle Polenstjerna, and you would have me aid you, eh?"

He took away my breath. He had indeed guessed aright.

"You must, you shall help," I said, fiercely.

He puffed for a minute or two. "Well, well," he muttered, "whether Mademoiselle turns her back on me or gives me her hand to kiss is no affair of mine. I am in love with her as all the world is. Not even the great Aurora could have surpassed her to-night. *Diantre!* she was superb, but—I am not going back to the Königstein, no, not for all the golden hair and blue eyes that ever fooled a book-worm."

"Who is talking of the Königstein?" I asked, scornfully.

"God bless the boy! I tell you, the Königstein lies at the end of that road."

Whereupon I flung away in a pet.

"Forget that corridor," he said, very seriously, "and



remember what you saw to-night." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "The truth, as you call it, is in the possession of his Majesty and his Ministers. If—if—pardon my bluntness,—if his Majesty has his way the world will know the truth fast enough, and Mademoiselle Polenstjerna will emerge as white as driven snow. Whether that will persuade the King of Sweden to give her back her castle I leave you to judge; but if his Majesty fails"—he threw up his hands—"the lie will reign. That is all. Believe me, his Majesty can clear Mademoiselle to-morrow; he does not choose as yet, not yet——"

"Stop!" I cried. "For God's sake, stop!" I was crushed by the most terrible thought that had as yet polluted my soul.

"I will tell you a true story," he pursued, remorselessly: "Five years ago the brother of the great Aurora, the grandson of a Field Marshal of Sweden, was as foolish as young men will be, and he meddled in what was no business of his, the affairs of the wife of the Elector of Hanover. Well, one fine morning he was found dead with a dagger in his side. Dead men tell no tales. And the wife of his Serenity,—they shut her up and she is shut up still. My friend, she will never come out, never! And the great Aurora travelled over Europe to find and make known the truth. Pah! she found, as we all know, more than a friend at Dresden."

But he knew, as I knew, that it is not blue eyes and golden hair in a woman that win the allegiance of a man's soul.

"It is time," he broke off sharply, "that we see how Kätchen has been spending her night."

He drew his sword, and with a brief "Follow me," stole forth and crept cautiously up the stairs in the dark. Every half-dozen steps he paused to listen, and crawled on again. My teeth chattered; we passed along a narrow corridor, up more stairs, along another corridor. The Graf stopped and listened attentively. There was no sound but the clicking of my teeth and I heard him laugh softly. He groped,

found a ladder, placed it, stole up it; a long fumbling, and the frosty stars suddenly stared down on me through an open trap-door. At a sign I crawled up too; he drew the ladder after him and closed the trap noiselessly. In the magic silence of a great frost, around us lay the towers and spires, the palaces and hovels of Warsaw. Far away I heard the tinkle of a sleigh-bell, the howl of a dog. The Graf crawled forward, dragging the ladder. We passed over two or three houses and then there was a break. He pushed the ladder to make a bridge, and, to my horror, cat-like, crept across and signed to me to do likewise, and somehow I struggled over. To this day I have only to close my eyes and I can feel that ladder swaying and bending under me, can see down, down there the narrow street. He grinned as I joined him. "This," he whispered, "is the beginning of the truth. And now do you mark the light in that attic window? Crawl forward on your stomach and look in. Be wary, for if you are seen, you are a lost man. Shall I give you a nip of brandy?"

I shook my head; and you may be sure I crawled as I have never crawled, before or since. At last I was by the sill where the light twinkled. Raising myself gingerly on my elbows I drew a deep breath and stared in. When I next looked round the Graf was beckoning impatiently, and most reluctantly I shuffled back to him. As I slid helplessly down the ladder, a church clock boomed out and I counted the strokes, five. Heavens! I had been at that window more than an hour.

"Now tell me what you saw," the Graf commanded, as he poured brandy down my throat in bed.

"The room," I said, "had four people——"

"I will tell you who they were: Kätchen, of course, Elsa, Patkul—and my Lord Bengt."

"Graf, you are the devil himself."

"Never mind that. Tell me what they were doing."

"They were talking very seriously. I could not hear a

word. Patkul talked most of all, and every minute he took a nip of spirits——”

“Vodka,” he corrected. “That is a trick the Livonian has ; the Livonians learned it from the Muscovites. Vodka is liquor straight from hell. Go on.”

“Neither Bengt nor Elsa said much, Bengt least of all, for he kept his eyes fixed on the papers which they were passing round. While they were talking Kätchen filched two of the papers and whipped them into her pocket.”

“The minx !” he cried. “Bless her itching fingers !” Down went a gulp of brandy.

“Bengt saw her, Graf, but the others did not——”

“Damnation ! he did ? Are you quite sure ? ”

“Quite sure. And he looked, oh, if you could have seen him ! But he said nothing. And then they put the papers together and placed them in a large cover and fastened the seal, and Elsa took them, and that was all.”

I lay back exhausted.

“There was something more ?” he asked, quickly.

“On my honour nothing to do with the papers——”

“You shall tell me,” he said, fiercely “or——”

I made an effort, for I was getting very sleepy. “They stood talking some minutes very pleasantly, and then Patkul tried to put his arm round Elsa’s waist and—and Bengt came between them. Elsa is rather fond of Bengt, I think——”

“They all are, confound him ! He can do anything with women, the fools ! And Bengt spitted the Livonian hound, tell me ! he spitted him ? *Herr Gott !* with Bengt he would not have a chance——”

“He would have spitted him, but Kätchen pushed him away, and—and”——I blushed for shame——“Kätchen let him put his arm round her waist and gave him the kiss Elsa had refused, and then you beckoned, and——”

“The minx !” he was rubbing his hands. “The minx ! ah ! she knows her business. It is a lesson, my bookworm, what vodka will do when women are present.”

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The Graf was shaking his snuff-box thoughtfully. "Are you quite sure," he demanded, "that Bengt saw Kätchen filch those two papers?"

"Quite, quite sure. Oh! why did she allow that scoundrel to kiss her?"

"Pouf! a kiss! Perhaps she likes him, perhaps she does not. A woman's kiss in public generally means the latter. But we shall see later on." He rubbed his hands. "And now to sleep, my bookworm. I am infernally tired." He yawned. "*Allmächtiger!* we have had some fun to-night. There was the very devil of a jade at the ball, and she——"

When I opened my eyes it was broad daylight and the gleam of the winter sun told me it was past midday. I had slept, in fact, more than eight hours. And with that to comfort me I was left to kick my heels as best I could. Of the Graf I saw very little, of Kätchen nothing, and my Lord Bengt made no sign. But on the third day Fritz requested me to wait upon the Princess Rapirska, and I was all in a flutter as I ran to tell the Graf.

"I shall be there," he remarked, coolly, "in attendance on his Excellency. But, mark you, take no notice of me. In public we are strangers. I am supposed to be residing in his Excellency's house, and my Lord Bengt believes it." He grinned and winked as he took his pinch of snuff. "They will be very pleasant," he added, "I fancy, to-day, for they have good news."

"Indeed! Good news of what?"

"The Cardinal has had a courier that the Graf von Vitzthum has reached Swedish headquarters. I dare say it is all right; the Swedish Ministers are but men, and Von Vitzthum has his pockets full of persuasion for them. Yet I wish we could hear something of that Swedish King."

The Graf was right. At the palace of the Princess every one, servants included, was in full feather. Peace was in the air, and the very lackeys whispered eagerly in knots and shook their stupid pates knowingly. With some difficulty I

pushed my way into the outer salon, where the crowd of the quality was as thick as the mob of *canaille* outside. But his Majesty had not yet appeared. He, his Ministers, and a select circle were in the cabinet that opened off the dais, the *entrée* to which was jealously guarded, for affairs of State were being discussed, and probably his Majesty presently would have a public pronouncement to make. I waited patiently an hour or more. More than once I endeavoured to pass the jealously guarded portals, only to be repulsed, to the joy of those who saw my efforts.

"That is not the way," growled a harsh voice at my elbow. Heavens! it was his Excellency and the Graf with him. "That is not the way, M. Martin," he chuckled. "You must take 'em by the throat and shake 'em. A Pole does not understand politeness," he grinned at his joke.

With the Graf's eye on me I grinned, too.

"And how is M. Martin? he croaked, shaking his forefinger at me. "Ah! my young friend, we have had a sad job to get you out of his Majesty's clutches, a sad job——"

The old liar! "I am sure your Excellency has done everything possible," was what I said.

"No more conspiracies, if you please," he remarked, playfully. "It is the one point on which his Majesty, I regret to say, is quite implacable. I shall not be able to get you out a second time."

The doors swung open with humble bows, and we were in the presence of Majesty. The cabinet contained some twenty persons: half a dozen gentlemen, conversing in discreet whispers, whom I rightly took to be Ministers; two or three Polish grandees, one of whom was the battered *debauché*, the Prince Rapierska; his Majesty's confessor, decorously forbidding in his silk cassock; and around the King General Patkul, my Lord Bengt, the Princess Lubomirska, in mourning, our hostess, superbly dressed, a marvel of voluptuous, mournful beauty, and my Lady. The Cardinal, I observed at once, was not present, but, for all

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that, peace had spread her benign wings over the assembly, peace gaily fluttered in the ladies' fans, peace beamed in his Majesty's smiles and gleaming eyes, and peace lowered in the sombre scowl of General Patkul. The Ministers were chaffing under their breath. They were not jesting about peace, they were discussing something far more exciting. Five years ago a Swede, the great Aurora von Königsmark, the granddaughter of a Field Marshal of Sweden, had arisen from the marshes of Hamburg, had come, been seen, and conquered. Would the new Venus of the North, as their scandalous tongues called her, a Venus who was also the granddaughter of a Field Marshal of Sweden, repeat the tale? What was peace or war to this enthralling struggle? Mademoiselle Polenstjerna, whose cousin was a captain in his Swedish Majesty's Trabants, herself akin to half the noble families of Sweden, would decide whether there should be peace or war. I looked at my Lady. I could have kissed the hem of her robe. She was the granddaughter of a Field Marshal of Sweden every inch of her, though her girl's eyes, deep as the heaven's vault in vernal Maytime, and as pure, gave the lie to their vile talk.

The Princess deigned to advance to meet me, my Lady held her hand out with the frankest sweetness, and as I knelt to the royal Titan I felt that everyone was looking at me. Ah, yes! I was the *protégé* both of the rising and the risen sun. I was a man to be remembered, and I almost laughed in his Majesty's face at the utter dismay of the ushers who had repulsed me so haughtily.

Humbly I thanked the King for setting me free.

"Do not thank us," he replied, with the most gracious affability. "We misjudged you till these kind ladies proved that we were mistaken. It is they whom you must thank, and above all the Countess Polenstjerna, who knows better than we do the merits of her tutor."

So it was my Lady who had given me my freedom, and I had wavered as to whether I would help her!

"No," she answered, shyly, "I cannot take M. Martin's thanks. They belong to my cousin, and my good friend, the Princess Lubomirska."

Each of the great ladies denied it in turn. His Majesty broke in, laughing.

"Happy M. Martin, who can enlist the pleading of three such fair ladies. What would you do, Excellenz, if you were M. Martin?"

"I should thank your Majesty again," replied the great man, "your Majesty who can temper justice with mercy at beauty's bidding."

"A man," interposed Patkul softly, "who has not known the Königstein, has not lived. M. Martin wisely begins rather than ends there."

The King laughed. Poor treacherous fool! Little did he guess how jests can be turned into grim truth by royal wizards. A gleam stole into his Excellency's bloodshot eyes. He remembered the remark, and so did General Patkul.

"When we have made peace," the King said, in high good humour, "there will be no more need of prisons. I will ask his Eminence to rebaptise the Königstein. Countess, you will, I trust, honour my castle with a visit?"

My lady curtsied, pink to her ears, and Patkul's face grew black.

"We will ask his Eminence," the King continued, "to call the castle the Schwedenstein, in honour of the occasion, and M. Martin shall give us a lesson." He laughed genially.

"Sire," I ventured to say, "I thank your Majesty, but I limit my teaching to the dead. I leave it to his Excellency to give lessons in the events of the day to the living."

"Bravo!" cried his Majesty. "A shrewd hit. The tutor has you, Flemming, on the hip."

"Yes," replied his Excellency, coolly, "M. Martin has a pretty wit, and he has sharpened it in the Königstein, not at my expense, but at that of your Majesty."

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The laughter was general. But his Excellency, for all his coolness, was ruffled.

“When M. Martin’s wit fails,” he remarked, “we shall have to shut him up again,”—he looked innocently at the Princess Rapierska,—“for it gives our ladies harmless employment.”

The Princess flushed. “I presume, Excellenz,” she replied, meeting his eyes haughtily, “that a lady’s harmless employment is better than a gentleman’s harmful one.”

His Majesty frowned, and hastily endeavoured to divert the conversation by turning to Bengt.

“The next courier of his Eminence,” he said, “will set you free, Herr Graf.”

Bengt bowed sweetly. “It will, I hope, sire, set more than myself free.”

The scowl that lowered in Patkul’s face and the slight titter amongst the Ministers proclaimed that another shaft had gone home. With peace Patkul must return baffled to his master the Czar.

The ready Graf whispered in his Excellency’s ear, and his Excellency whispered to his Majesty. The King nodded, saying impatiently, “In a moment,” and he drew Bengt aside. At once they were engaged in earnest talk.

Patkul took advantage of the lull to insinuate himself into the group of ladies, towering over them like a hawk swooping down upon a covey of tender herons. He was fawning on my Lady with that infernal silky audacity with which he wormed himself into the confidence of men and women alike. And my Lady listened to his fine speeches graciously, nay, eagerly. She was doing it for Sweden.

Bengt, I did not fail to observe, for all the deference he paid to King and Minister, was aware of everything passing in that panelled cabinet, as a trifle proved. With an easy bow, he suddenly glided away; my Lady had dropped her handkerchief; he restored it to her in silence and with a grave and cousinly courtesy. Their fingers touched, their

eyes met for the briefest moment—and he was back listening to the King so quickly that no one but myself and the Graf saw what happened. And it was well the King did not. Ah! sire, not all your honeyed compliments, not your crown and blue ribbon, could summon so tender a fleeting pink into my Lady's cheeks, nor could your kingdom, laid at her feet, bring under her lashes what Bengt had read there.

The conference was over.

The doors swung open, the trumpets rang out, and we were on the dais of the salon, facing the gay assembly that had trod on my toes. When the acclamations had died away, his Majesty was pleased to descend and, ruddy with good humour, to move about in the crowd. To the women in particular he was a perfect model of royal dignity and condescension, dashed with a courtier's homage.

"It is a lesson in deceiving," whispered the Graf. "Mark it, my bookworm. for he has deceived more than any two kings already."

Yes, that was his *arcanum imperii*. He could not win victories, he could not govern, but he was the slave and taskmaster of the women, his subjects. And the king who can be that may ruin his kingdom, but he will always be popular.

"He learned the art from the priests, I am sure," pursued the Graf. "Conquer the women and you can snap your fingers at the men. Would you not like to be his Majesty's confessor? It must be almost as interesting as to hear the confessions of his Excellency. *Diantre!* you do not find *him* allowing his conscience to be kept by a priest. *Herr Gott!* the whole of mother Church and the College of Cardinals could not do it. That is why he remains a Protestant, I suppose."

"Do you think his Majesty really tells all?" I asked.

"All! Pouf! All! How can he, when by bedtime he has forgotten the women whom he deceived in the morning? And what would be *sins* in you and me are mere

humours in a prince, how God shows for the comfort of the world that kings have a taint of mortality in them."

"Hush!" I cried, in anguish. "Tell me, instead, where is the Queen."

"The Queen! what a question!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh! it is not safe for her Majesty to be in Warsaw when there is war in Poland. She is better in her *Schloss*, weeping with her mother-in-law, reading her Bible, and praying that his Majesty may be reconverted to the Augsburg Confession. The Queen does not approve of the Polish ladies, and the Polish ladies do not approve of her—*que voulez-vous, mon ami?*"

"After all, poor Queen, she has chosen the better part," I retorted, and the Graf took a pinch of snuff, in pity for her and me.

My Lady was conversing in Swedish with my Lord Bengt. I took it as an act of great courage on her part, and a sweet compliment to myself, that she braved her cousin so far as to notice, with proud solemnity, the Graf's salutation. And the Graf thanked me, for even his battered heart was moved. From time to time ladies and gentlemen were conducted to the dais, and my Lord exerted himself to the utmost to further the good cause with my Lady's help. The men were at her feet in a trice, but not even my Lord could prevent the women from becoming the enemies of Mademoiselle for life.

They brought in wine and we drank gay toasts. Peace was in the air and peace was sealed in the goblet's brim. Gradually the salon began to thin.

Some thirty or forty, however, remained, in the hope that they would learn something more definite than the peace and good-will of all men, for over there in the corner his Majesty was conversing with the envoy from Vienna. The envoy had just arrived, and his Majesty had advanced to meet him. That must mean that when spring came we would march to the Rhine. Nothing could be better. A

campaign among the vineyards of the Palatinate was a parade compared with fighting in the morasses of the Minsk, and the French marshals were gentlemen who understood the art of war. They did not choose sheepskins and winter snows for pitched battles, nor did they break the laws of the great captains and charge artillery with the cold steel as did those brigands from the North. Let the Swede have it out by himself with the accursed Muscovite, and the more harm they did one another the better.

Suddenly the doors behind us opened and a man in furs, splashed with mud and snow, tumbled upon the dais, his spurs catching in the cassock of his Majesty's confessor.

"Idiot!" growled his Excellency, "what is it?"

The man snatched off his cap. "A despatch for his Majesty," he panted, quite forgetting to bow. Ha! the wished-for news had come at last!

"From his Eminence?" asked his Excellency, frigidly, while his fingers trembled on the seal.

"No, Excellenz, from the commandant at Grodno."

"Grodno?" The snuff-box of his Excellency rattled on the floor, and my head knocked against the Graf's as we scrambled to pick it up. "The devil!" whispered the Graf, rubbing his pate. "I do not like news from Grodno."

A thrill ran through the assembly. A despatch from Grodno! Then the armistice must be concluded. Bengt said something to my Lady rapidly in Swedish. Her lips parted and her bosom heaved.

"Good!" said his Excellency. "Thank you, Graf, my hand is getting gouty."

We were all agog, but his Excellency chose to make a compliment to my Lady before he would even break the seal. We watched his bloodshot eyes run along the lines, but he betrayed no sign, and after he had folded up the paper he stood pursing his rouged lips. The news must be good, and eyes grew bright and tiny titters of excited laughter bubbled here and there.

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In dead silence, broken only by the murmur of the King's and the envoy's muffled voices, his Excellency stepped off the dais and walked towards the pair. His Majesty took the despatch and read carelessly. Heavens! he had crumpled it up, and was striding with brows of thunder upon the dais.

"*Also*," he broke out in German to my Lord Bengt, "this is the way your master keeps his word."

"I am at a loss—" Bengt began suavely.

"But I am not," interrupted the King, ferociously. "Your master—he insults the Countess von Königsmark, and for the sake of peace I pass it by. I send him one of my gentlemen whom I trust"—he choked with rage—"and your master has him arrested as if he were a common felon. *Herr Jesus!* it is too much." He flung the despatch on the floor, whence his Excellency picked it up.

"I confess, sire, I do not understand——"

"Does," thundered the King, "does a Swede understand what is honourable?" Bengt tightened his lips resolutely; the sallow tint in his cheeks deepened. My Lady grasped her fan; the fan broke.

"Herr Graf," burst out the King, "I tell you that the King of Sweden has arrested my gentleman, the Graf von Vitzthum." A thrill ran through us all. Some of the Poles, I could see, were secretly delighted. "And as if that were not enough," shouted his Majesty, "the troops of your master have seized my city of Grodno——"

Grodno! Consternation sat on every face. Grodno! the Swedes at Grodno!

"It is infamous! In time of truce!" thundered the King.

A retort sprang to my Lord's lips, but he wisely suppressed it.

"And my commandant has barely escaped with his life." An angry growl swelled up from the salon.

"There is some mistake," said Bengt, coolly.

"There is!" retorted the King. "I have done with the King of Sweden."

He turned away, the great veins in his bull's neck thick as whipcord.

"Oh, no! you have not," whispered the Graf. "But that comes of playing at peace behind a king's back. Look at Patkul, my bookworm."

The scowl had given place to triumphant exultation, and the fire of immortal revenge. "Ah! ha! you will want the Czar now," his eyes cried aloud.

"Excellenz," said the King, "I beg your attendance, and yours, too, Herr General. Ladies,"—he had recovered himself sufficiently to be able to smile,—“you will pardon us, but my devotion is best shown by leaving you.”

"Sire," said Bengt, firmly, "if your Majesty desire it, I will leave to-night for Grodno and——"

"We will see," said his Majesty, shortly. "Princess, will you attend us in the cabinet?"

The Princess, smiling at this royal favour, moved towards the doors, when they were again flung open and another messenger stumbled into the salon.

"A despatch for the Herr Major-General Patkul," were his words. We stood in anguish. The light leaped into Patkul's eyes.

"Good news, sire!" he cried; "a body of Swedes has been surrounded at Dorfsnicki and cut to pieces. Grodno will soon be in the hands of your Majesty."

A wild shout swept up from the salon. My Lady shivered, but a smile of calm contempt curled Bengt's lips. Again that wild shout swept up.

The King withdrew.

"So much for peace," muttered the Graf. "But look out, my friend, we may have to cut our way out."

Now that the King was gone not a few hands were stealing to sword-hilts. Bengt was the object of their fury and my Lady next. Did not this man and this woman belong to the hateful race?

Bengt was arranging the blue and yellow handkerchief in

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which he carried his left arm, chatting all the while to his cousin and the Princess Lubomirska.

"M. Martin," he said, "will kindly wait until the coach of the Princess has been summoned. "Cousin, will you retire now or wait?"

My Lady gave him her hand and he stepped down as if he were about to tread a gavotte. They were half-way down the salon before anyone said anything.

"So you would slink away?" sneered a young Pole, amidst a titter of encouraging laughter.

"You will pardon me," said Bengt, smiling, "but soldiers are too stupid to understand the jokes of a courtier." He bowed and moved on.

"Does a soldier slink away?" mocked the Pole.

Bengt bowed again. "You are a young man," he replied, sweetly; "when you are a little older you will learn that a Swede never slinks away, as his Excellency will perhaps tell you."

The taunt was bitter. A hubbub of voices began to rage round the Swedish pair. The Graf sprang from the dais. I sprang after him.

"Gentlemen," I cried, "this is the palace of the Princess Rapierska, and there are ladies present."

"Exactly," said Bengt, dryly.

"We have no quarrel with you," said one of the ladies. "It is with you,—" and I blush to say she hurled at my Lady a term which made my blood run cold. It was that shameless jewelled dame whom I remembered at Dresden, and only the Graf kept me from striking the young fool whom she had egged on to begin this terrible business.

The cry was taken up. "The Swedish minion," and worse, I heard them repeat.

Before anyone could stop her that shameless creature, who was half drunk, had torn from my Lady's bodice the blue and yellow bow and trampled on it.

Then there was terrible silence. Bengt said and did absolutely nothing, and at this cruel indifference my Lady almost burst into tears.

The Graf was fretting like a gamecock. "Will some gentleman pick up that bow?" he snarled. No one moved; they knew the Graf at Dresden and Warsaw, and it was not his quarrel.

"No," said Bengt, freezingly, "we will leave the bow on the ground, if you please."

The Graf choked with astonished indignation and I could have cried with rage.

"We will have no brawling here," said Bengt, firmly. He beckoned to one of the lackeys and took from him a cup of wine. The crowd was hushed in sheer wonder.

"There is a pleasant custom," began my Lord calmly, "of drinking the best toasts from a lady's shoe. Cousin, you will permit me." He knelt down and removed my Lady's shoe. The ladies clapped their hands.

He filled the shoe with wine. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, gaily, "I drink to peace between Sweden and Poland, and confusion to all who would soil the honour of either." A roar of approval went up as he raised the toast to his lips. And then he paused a full minute and flung wine, bow, and shoe full in the face of the young Pole.

"By the time, sir," he said, fiercely, "that you have remembered that you deal with a Swedish soldier, I shall be here to wait upon you."

He conducted my Lady shoeless to the door, while half a dozen swords were out.

"Stand back!" cried the Graf; "this is the Graf von Polenstjerna's business, unless any of you gentlemen will make it his, and mine too."

The swords slowly went back into their scabbards, and the shoe and bow lay before us in a pool of wine.

When Bengt returned, he was accompanied by a sober gentleman in black.

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"The King's chirurgeon," whispered the Graf, delightedly. "Bengt means business."

"I am at your disposal," said Bengt, coldly. He stooped and picked up the shoe and bow, and we went out into the courtyard, and thence into a retired garden. It was all over in two minutes. Half a dozen passes and Bengt ran his man through the sword-arm. He fell into the embrace of the King's chirurgeon.

Bengt wiped his sword carefully on both shoe and bow and placed the bow, all bloody, in his hat. "You have to thank the Countess Polenstjerna," he said to his opponent, "that you will live to see peace. I promised my cousin that I would not hurt you more than I could help. But"—he faced the group of nobles,—"if I hear such words again of the Countess Polenstjerna, by God! I will force them down that man's throat at the sword's point."

The Graf and I followed him out. He turned up a staircase and disappeared.

"Brawling in a palace," muttered the Graf, "but the King will forgive it for the sake of the *beaux yeux* and pink cheeks of Mademoiselle. It was a pretty device, was it not?"

I agreed. My Lord Bengt had not studied books in vain.

"And as clean and neat a thrust," pronounced the Graf, "as ever I saw. None of your damned finnickin' Italian tricks, but honest wrist-play and *finesse*, as the masters teach at Paris. I could not have done it better myself. One, you thrust; two, you feint; three, you are under his guard; and four, you are home. *Allmächtiger Gott!* what a wrist and eye my Lord Bengt has!"

"It was lovely," I said, thinking of my Lady when Bengt gave her back her bow and shoe.

"Ha, ha! it tickled even the cockles of your heart, my bookworm. Yet I know someone whose wrist is as supple as Bengt's. Oh, why did not one of those Polanders give me

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the chance? Confound it! I would spit them in three, yes, three."

He hummed his favourite tune, "*Mein Liebchen hat ein Rosenmund.*" "But not yet, not yet—" he added suddenly.

"What is in your wicked mind now?" I asked, his tone was so grave.

"A fencer's jealous thoughts, only a fencer's jealous thoughts." And he began to hum again.

But I knew that they were much more than that.





CHAPTER V

THE FRUITS OF A MAN'S AMBITION

WHAT would happen now? Warsaw was in a frenzy of excitement. Hardly had the news of the arrest of Count von Vitzthum, and the seizure of Grodno and the rout of a Swedish party at Dorfsnicki been spread broadcast over the city, when a fresh courier arrived. The Poles and Saxons who had cut the Swedes to pieces had presumed on their success, and flushed with a victory which was only a trumpery skirmish had advanced again, to be routed in turn and hurled into headlong and disastrous flight. King Augustus had no chance now of recovering Grodno. Worse still, the affair at Dorfsnicki had maddened the Swedes, and from all quarters the troops of the Swedish main army were pouring into Lithuania by forced marches to reinforce their advance guard. It was not likely that King Charles would sit quietly under the smart even of a trumpery skirmish, and he had shown what he thought of the Polish King by the arrest of his Gentleman of the Chamber. Nothing now could stop his onward march to Warsaw but the crown army of the Republic. The crown army! an army that would only fight if it were paid,—and who was to pay it? The most circumstantial stories ran like wild-fire through Warsaw. Men swore that the Finnish cavalry had been seen scouting twenty leagues beyond Grodno, and for the moment everyone expected to see the Trabants, the sheepskins, and the bluecoats springing from the ground beneath our feet.

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and pouncing on hapless Warsaw. The Court was mad with rage and terror ; and once more everyone cursed King and Cardinal, Muscovite and Swede, mistresses and heretics, Saxon, Jew, and Pole. Needless to say in this furious whirlpool of faction, feud, and fear, Bengt's exploit passed quite unnoticed. What was it that a Swedish noble had run a Pole through the arm when in a few hours Swedish peasants might be cutting the throats of every Polish man, woman, and child to be found within ten leagues of Warsaw ?

What would King Augustus do ? No one knew ; the King himself did not know. Couriers rode forth every hour ; couriers with bloody spurs arrived every hour. The Saxon troops had left ; the King's guard had left ; they had been recalled ; they were marching east to Grodno ; they were marching south to Cracow ; they had fled to the west, taking what remained of the royal coffers ; they were halted. The Cardinal was openly pointed at as the real author of King Charles's *coup-de-main* ; the negotiations were a mere blind ; he hated Von Vitzthum and rightly ; no one in the Swedish camp desired peace, the Swedish Ministers least of all ; the Cardinal would seize the crown jewels and fly to the Swedish headquarters, his niece would go with him, and they had already secured Prince Jablonowski and the crown army. With still more diabolical craft, an accommodation had been patched up by the Cardinal's help between the Muscovite and the Swede, and Poland might have to face alone their combined onslaughts. The Swedish troops in Pomerania were already marching to cut off the retreat of his Majesty to Saxony. His Majesty must fly—he had already decided to do so this very night, to Cracow, to Lemberg, to Marienburg, to Dresden. It was positively asserted that in despair he had resolved on abdicating, and couriers had been despatched to summon the sons of the late King, the Princes James and Alexander Sobieski.

One thing was certain ; the exodus from Warsaw had begun. The streets were blocked with coaches, calèches,

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and waggons, horsemen, and footmen. Every whisper became a rumour, every rumour a report, every report a despatch.

Forty-eight feverish hours galloped by. We awoke feeling that we were fools and dupes. The sky that had been as black as pitch suddenly became blue and rosy. It was only a Swedish advance guard at Grodno; the Swedish King and his main body were no farther than Wilna. Grodno was fifty leagues distant, the horses of the Swedes were worn out, the troops starving; the bridges were broken down, the rivers half frozen, the roads impassable. Nothing short of a miracle could bring King Charles to Warsaw in less than a month. And what might not happen in a month? The deputation of the Diet had started; the Cardinal was sitting quietly in his palace, the King was still here, nay, he had received the Cardinal in audience. A misunderstanding had arisen; it would be explained; an accommodation could easily be arranged; peace could and would still be made.

"My dear bookworm," said the Graf, who was my window into Warsaw, "you may wager that his Majesty is thinking much more of Mademoiselle's blue eyes than of King Charles's Blue Boys. A victory in a lady's boudoir is dearer to him than two stricken fields."

"And that victory he will never win," I replied, scornfully.

The Graf tapped his snuff-box. "Do not be too sure. The King has yet to find the woman whose entrenchments he cannot creep around when he cannot storm. Mademoiselle, you forget, can be made a Countess to-morrow by the King. He has sworn, they say, to clear her——"

"What?"

"Well, he can, and a woman values a title, and gratitude in a woman is like charity, it can cover——"

"Stop! Why, even Bengt is better than you. Dear Graf, do remember that we have sworn to save her."

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"I am not likely to forget it. But it is about time that we put your plan into execution, eh?"

"My plan!" I repeated. "But I have not got any. I thought you——"

He burst out laughing. "*Allmächtiger!* you are a glorious conspirator."

"Oh! can you not see——" I jumped up. "I am sure you have a plan." I looked into his kindly, cunning eyes.

"Yes, I have a plan, a great plan, a damnably difficult plan."

Of course Kätchen chose this of all moments to thrust her head in at the door.

"The Herr Graf von Polenstjerna," she whispered, "is in the parlour and would see M. Martin at once. Go, or he will come in here and that will be the devil." She stuck out her tongue at both of us.

"Kätchen," I said, "if you do not keep the Graf here till I can learn his plan I will slap your face as Elsa slapped the face of General Patkul."

"You spy!" she exclaimed, furiously, but I slipped round her and the Graf had the pleasure of making his peace, and mine, too.

Bengt, whom I feared no longer, was awaiting me in the wainscoted parlour.

"My cousin," he began, with a grave simplicity, "desires me to thank you for your help in that unfortunate affair. You made Ebba and myself feel that in my absence her honour was safe in your hands. Is that nothing? I at least think not."

I bowed, touched to the quick. The splendid courtesy in the use of his cousin's personal name was something in my Lord Bengt's mouth that you must be a tutor and a yeoman to appreciate.

My Lord gazed steadily at the fire. "What lies the philosophers tell,"—he murmured,— "what lies, when they would persuade us a man always pursues his own interest!

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And a man who does not is to others a madman sailing the sea without a compass and without a rudder. What is that man's motive? is it passion or pure perversity?"

"Passion for what, Herr Grefve?"

He stirred the fire with his boot. "Aye, there 's the rub," he replied, softly. "I believed once that the motives of men's hearts were really simple and strong,—love, ambition, revenge,—these three alone. But I was wrong, utterly wrong. I forgot the power to sacrifice self."

He had forgotten my presence as he spoke his slow thoughts to the red tongues of flame.

"With some men," he muttered, "and one or two women, the power to sacrifice self is overmastering——"

"With most women and some men, I should say," I corrected, gently.

He flashed a look at me. "Perhaps," he murmured. "And then there is the desire for the truth." He turned suddenly round. "Do you honestly think that a woman feels the desire for truth? Does a woman know what justice is,—can she know?"

"I am sure of this," I said boldly, "that a woman, even a degraded woman, is ruled by something stronger and better than the desire for justice and the truth,—the power to love." He took no notice of the deep flush which burned in my cheeks.

"How so?" he asked, in sincere perplexity.

"Because the power to love, though it may not keep you good, will always make you respect the good in others, even when marred by the bad and the vile."

"I wonder if that be true?" he asked the fire. "M. Martin, you have met women different from the women I have met."

"No," I said, quickly, "we have seen them differently."

He was not in the least offended. "So that is your creed? No wonder you burnt your Hobbes and your Machiavelli long ago."

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"It is not my creed, Herr Grefve, for I cannot always believe it. But it is what I feel and what I *know* I ought to feel."

He turned sharply round. The chain of his musings was snapped.

"Have you guessed, M. Martin," he began coolly, "that I am here a prisoner of my own making?" He laughed at my frank incredulity. "Yes, it is so. My cousin promised me that when she left Polenstjerna she would not come to this Court. And when I learned away out there that she had been persuaded to come hither, I took my life in my hands. There is only one way by which a soldier can honourably reach the camp of his foes—as a prisoner. I came that way." Again he laughed gently. Was he telling the truth?

"Now, why did I ride," he asked, quietly, "into the midst of the Oginskis? The camp said it was heroic bravery. It was nothing of the kind. Pah! if there is a fool on this earth, it is your hairbrained hero. No, you can guess"—his voice deepened with a wonderful softness—"it was because I would restore my cousin, free from stain, to her castle. It is for her, and for her sake alone, that I have tried to be and to do all those things that ambition goads a man to do and to be."

His voice smote against the panels with a vibrating passion. What was he about to do for her sake? I saw a young man in the frosty watches of the night lying on his elbow in the snow, his face pressed against a pane of attic glass, and I shivered.

"I cannot," he was saying, "I cannot marry my cousin until she is once more Grefvinna Polenstjerna, nor would I." Pride fought with passion in his voice and conquered it. "That is why I rode into the midst of the Oginskis, and you and she are the only persons who know it. I *will* clear her. I will." Mouth and jaw were cold and hard as steel. A terrible throb of feeling swept over me. What I ought to have said was this:

"Herr Grefve, you can clear her now: leave Warsaw to-

night ; go to King Charles and tell your master the whole truth. Lay bare the secrets of that cruel tragedy which lies buried in King Eric's Tower ; show that your cousin whom you love is as innocent and high-souled as she is a pure and beautiful woman ; the King will believe you, you, the captain in his Trabants, and then, for her sake, take what King Charles awards you."

But I had not the courage, nor had he, for all his fearless spirit. Ebba, he felt, would renounce him, would spurn him, and earth would become a hell. To-day I am wiser. Love, immortal love, that knits the soul to its carnal coffin ; love, the immortal gift of God to our vile bodies and stained, suffering hearts,—such is the mystery of man and woman in a world of sin and eternal hope,—love is not quenched by infamy, if infamy be purified by the sacrifice of self. And my Lady would not have ceased to love him, for it would have been the sublimest proof of his, the man's, love and self-sacrifice, vanquishing the fear of hell and the pangs of death for her, the woman's sake.

I was cold in my cowardice, colder when I saw the fine scorn curling his determined lips. "Do you suppose," he asked, "that I would stay a prisoner in Warsaw to make peace? Peace, forsooth! Were it not for my cousin I would let everything go, to smash this kingdom and its devil's brood to pieces."

He walked up and down until he had mastered himself. Ah! if only those who deny that a head cold as ice can be joined with a heart hot as fire could have seen him then!

"You were released to help in the making of peace," he began. "You have promised also to help my cousin to the best of your power. Will you answer me this? Supposing that helping her was opposed to the service that you owe the King of Poland, what would you do?"

"I help the Countess Polenstjerna," I said at once.

"One more question," he said, very gravely. "Remember, you are helping to make the Countess Polenstjerna my

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wife. You know better than most that whoever crosses my path, be he prince or pauper, Herr Graf or Herr Tutor, Saxon, Pole, or Swede, I will crush,—if need be. Friends I will honour, but rivals I will crush. M. Martin,"—he rose,—“you have a right——”

I, the tutor, a right ! I laughed in his face.

“Yes, I repeat, you have a right to say, ‘I will not help you on those terms.’ Now, what is your answer ?”

He put his hand on my shoulder and gazed into my eyes.

“The Countess knows—” I began.

“Pardon me, that is no answer,” he interrupted, with sharp passion.

“The Countess knows that I know I can never hope to be anything more than her servant till death. I cannot change her heart, nor can you, Herr Grefve.”

“You both know that ?” He sank into his chair.

“Yes. Three days ago I promised I would never speak again of this matter. But your cousin and I first knew it that night at Polenstjerna when the papers were burned. After two years we know it still. Were I the Duke of Sudermania, I could not change her heart, no, not if I were fifty dukes or kings.”

A strange pity mingled with his exultation. “I am sorry,” he astounded me by saying, “for, by God ! I would rather have you for a rival than any man.”

Has a tutor ever been paid a compliment like that, I wonder ?

“It is idle to talk of rivals,” I replied softly, “and I know it perhaps better than you, the Grefve Polenstjerna.”

A flame of jealousy flared up and flickered out. “No rivals !” he muttered. Ah, yes ! there was one, and of that one he dared not speak.

“Thank you,” he said, in his simplest and stateliest way. “I am proud to have asked you, prouder that you have answered me as you have. But you do not trust me ?” he added, suddenly.

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I rose and faced him. "What does trusting matter?" I asked. "You and I are working for the same thing. And I say this—before God it is the truth:—That you would save the Countess Polenstjerna makes me more ready to trust you, nay, I honour you for it. Ah! my Lord, show me what you have shown your cousin, and I will trust you as she does. And when the Countess Polenstjerna is once more mistress of her own, free from stain, I shall say good-bye to you and to her for ever."

"What will you do?" he asked, with eager interest.

"Oh! my Lord, what does it matter what I shall do? But I fancy the trenches in the Low Countries and the swords of England's enemies will do what I want most speedily."

"Are all English tutors like you, M. Martin?"

I brushed the question impatiently away. "If you would know the reason," I said, "it is not that I am an extraordinary man. I am a very ordinary man, made as ordinary men, full of weakness, but with some goodness waiting to be called out into life. God has been good to me. He has brought the Countess Polenstjerna into my life."

"For what are you grateful, then?" He was genuinely perplexed.

"Ah! Herr Grefve, a man is not grateful to a woman for this or that deed of kindness,—not for a hundred deeds of kindness. The gratitude that moulds a man's life, that springs up eternal in the heart is when a woman has given a man a new spirit. God alone knows what I owe to my mistress, the Countess Polenstjerna; things of the spirit cannot be put into words, and no man can take them away. Had I been tutor to some other fair young lady of gentle birth, I hope I should have done my duty. But here in Warsaw or Dresden I should have trod the road which leads to the love for which men risk their lives. I should have striven for wealth and honour and the high places of the world. But I have been tutor to the Countess Polenstjerna, and I cannot. It is her spirit that rebels, the spirit that she



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has given me, and it is her spirit that bids me help her. That is the truth."

"Yes," he said, after a long pause, "you love my cousin Ebba."

"Yes, Herr Grefve, I love her." We stared into each other's eyes.

"You can never win her," he cried. "Never!"

"No; if I were the Graf von Polenstjerna and you the tutor, I could not win her."

An incredulous smile stole out and died away.

"You shall help me," he said in his deliberate tones. I waited.

"The documents," he began, "that can clear my cousin are this moment in Warsaw. Two of them have been stolen."

"Stolen!" I cried faintly.

"Yes. I have learned that the King will produce the documents if, but only if—" he looked at me fixedly.

"My God!"

"Before that shall happen," he said, "Poland shall be a ruin. Ebba shall be a traitress rather than the wanton of Augustus the Strong."

"Thank God! Herr Grefve, you think as I do."

"We Polenstjerna men are no saints," he cried, "but our women are honest and pure. You have never heard the truth about the White Countess. She might have been other than she was, but she was a Polenstjerna. The great-great-niece of a woman who loved our great Gustavus and kept her virtue would die rather than become the wanton of a perjured Saxon Elector."

So that was the real story of the White Countess? No wonder that her portrait hung for worship in the hall of her race!

"The documents of which I speak," he pursued, eagerly, "must pass into our possession. It is the only way to save my cousin."

If his Majesty could only have seen his face!

"But that is not the difficulty to-day," he pursued, in his

gravest tones. "I have been ordered to proceed at once to Grodno—to my master's headquarters, wherever they are. At this eleventh hour I may be able to arrange an armistice, something,—anything,—that will give us time. I know my master, I have influence with him, but unless his own heart is moved, not an angel from heaven could persuade him. Were it not for Ebba and what peace means for her, I would not go on what I feel is a fool's errand. And how can I go, leaving her and those cursed documents in the hands of those who would ruin her? Ah! God! that men should be such puppets in the grip of fate!"

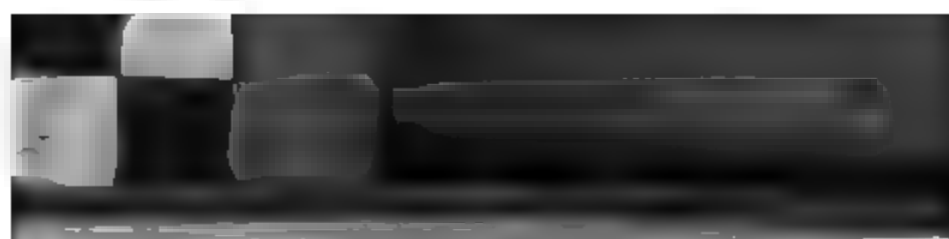
Puppets! No. Fate! No. That is how both weak and strong mock themselves. His fate was of his own making. And the innocent, the woman whom he loved, must reap with him the fruits of the harvest that he had sown. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow as he paced to and fro. I pitied him, this strong, desperate man with his remorseless brain, bound hand and foot by an overpowering love,—soaring ambition, fettered relentlessly by love. Without it he had been free to carve his way to the high places of the world, and love for my Lady manacled him. The Graf was right when he predicted that what would ruin my Lord Bengt would be his one overmastering devotion to one woman and one woman alone. And men can say that there is no God, no God whose eyes are on the truth!

"Yes, I must go," he said, with that tiger's leap with which his decisions sprang into his mind. "I must go. We will balk the Muscovite."

I looked at him. He was perfectly cool. The ice-cold brain had, as always, mastered the furnace of passion.

"M. Martin," he said, "you will take my place. I leave my cousin in your charge, and you will do your duty. She will trust you as I do." He held out his hand. For the sake of my Lady I took it. Without another word he strode from the room.

I went swiftly back to the Graf.



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"Have you found a plan?" he asked, smiling.

"I am nearer a plan than I was an hour ago."

"The devil you are!" He wheeled his chair round and surveyed me narrowly. "What has that liar been saying? You look most damnably pleased with yourself."

It was not a time to be squeamish and I told him everything. The recital left him gazing at me, an untasted pinch of snuff in his fingers.

"You are a queer fellow," he said, "a most extraordinarily queer fellow. You confide in everyone, you confess to everyone. If I did not know you to be upright I should call you the slipperiest, most double-faced rascal in Warsaw. It beats me how you do it."

"Where is Kätchen?" I asked sharply.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Kätchen is gone; you will not see her for some time."

"What! left Warsaw?" I very nearly shook him.

"I do not know. Those were her words." He sprang to his feet. "This damned business is slipping through my fingers. There is something afoot, and I cannot find out what it is." He was almost as perturbed as my Lord Bengt had been.

I sat still, my head feeling like lead. My plan to get the documents had been shattered at one blow. "Oh, go, dear Graf," I cried; "go, for God's sake!"

He walked slowly to the door. "Take care of yourself till I come back, my bookworm, take care of yourself."

I hardly heeded his words. He paused in the doorway. "You can ruminate on this," he muttered: "The documents which will clear my Lady will almost certainly condemn my Lord Bengt. That much I have learned. It has not occurred to you, but he knows it, for he has seen them. Adieu!"

Fool that I was! The blood rushed to my head; a great vista opened before me with a smiting crash. "Graf!" I howled, springing to my feet. It was too late.

I could but pray God that he would not be long.



CHAPTER VI

THE PRINCESS INTERFERES

TWENTY-FOUR hours galloped by ; but the Graf did not return. Bengt had gone, Kätchen had gone, and now the Graf. What in heaven's name did it mean ?

I was not blind or deaf. Out of doors in the filthy streets coaches and horsemen, calèches and sleighs, soldiers and couriers, spies and cut-throats, nobles and their mistresses, Jews, heretics, and dogs came and went. In the silent watches of the night the bells of the Nuns of St. Paul and of the Dominicans had lost their tongues, but I could hear as I threshed in my sleepless bed the rolling throb of drums, or the call of trumpet answering trumpet-call, the feverish clatter of horses' hoofs, men coming and going, always coming and going. Day and night, no rest, no repose. In Warsaw and out of it events were marching, marching, marching, nay, rushing on. In three weeks we must know whether there would be peace or war, whether the Muscovite had or had not won. The looms of fate were spinning, night and day, the woof of the destinies of kings and nations ; you could almost hear the ceaseless whirr of their remorseless wheels. While the hours rushed by in Warsaw and Grodno I was condemned simply to watch the hour-glass, the sand dribbling, dribbling, always dribbling, never hasting and never stopping, and every grain big with a nation's destiny, big with the fate of my Lady.

"Clear her, save her," I repeated, as I fretted up and

down. "Save her," yes, that was the supreme duty for me. But could I, into whose charge she had been put, could I do anything which would condemn the man whom she loved, who had trusted to my honour? "Save her," yes; better dead, better a traitress, better a broken heart, than to be the wanton of a king, the plaything of a year, petted and caressed as the queen of a Maytime and then thrown aside, or at best to be fobbed off on some quiet cloister to learn in a nun's cell not to put your trust in princes. The thought maddened me. I seized my sword and set about exploring this inn whose eery silences burned with fiery thrust into my head. Most of the rooms, I found, were unfurnished, and all empty save two, the Graf's and Kätchen's, and those gave me food for thought. Kätchen's was in wild confusion: boots, petticoats, bodices, hats, caps, and finery of all sorts lay tossed pell-mell. But the finery, I soon observed, was all summer finery; the bodices and petticoats might have danced at the Leipzig fair,—they would be useless in a Polish winter; Kätchen had gone in a hurry, and she had taken her clothes with her. The Graf's chamber was much the same. He, too, had fled in a hurry, and had taken his clothes with him. What in heaven's name did it mean?

I returned with a heavy heart. The gloom of a second day stole down on me. I sprang up. I had caught the soft rustle of a woman's dress in the deadly stillness. It was Elsa!

"M. Martin," she said, hastily, "the Princess would see you at once."

"I cannot come," I replied. If I went the Graf would be sure to return, and that, as Kätchen said, would be the devil.

"You must come," she urged, earnestly. "I am not to return without you."

"Elsa," I said, suddenly, "why do you hate General Patkul so?" Ah! there was no sauciness now, only fear, in her staring eyes.

"The next time," I went on slowly, "slap him twice, thrice, not once."

"*Herr Jesus!*" she clasped her hands. "You will tell Fritz!" Her terror was absolute.

"What did you do with the papers after that?" I asked.

"I took them back to his Excellency. It was not I, but Fritz, who stole them," she was whimpering. "And I swear I put them back just where they came from."

"Kätchen persuaded you?" I looked hard at her.

"Yes, she said I would be doing you a service, and I wanted to do you a service, and so I got Fritz to help me." She continued to whimper.

I thought for a second or two. "You would do me a service, a great service?"

She nodded eagerly. How I blessed that night in Dresden! "Do you think that you and Fritz could steal the papers again?"

"I will try, yes, I will try."

My heart leaped up. "Then bring them here to-night, and I will kiss your hand and bless you for ever."

"You shall have them, M. Martin, if a woman can do it. I promise."

I took her hands to thank her, and she looked up in my face. Fritz would never have known of that either. But I recalled the supper room at Dresden. I dropped her hand.

"And now you shall take me to the Princess," I said.

God gave women quick hearts, and they understand these things much better than we, poor fools of men, think.

Fritz was waiting for us with a hooded sleigh in the courtyard at the back. "Cover your face, please," Elsa whispered. She sprang up beside her husband, and I was whirled away this way and that. 'Ten minutes' walking would have brought us to the palace, but we took rather more than half an hour, for we must have driven, it seemed, twice around Warsaw before the sleigh stopped in the

courtyard. Not even the spies of the Muscovite Beast could have said whence the sleigh had come.

Elsa sprang out, gathering up her skirts. "Run, M. Martin," she said, and I ran after her across the yard and up some stairs, and finally dropped panting into a chair in an empty room.

Surely I was back in Polenstjerna, for there was Greta, torch in hand, in her Swedish dress, curtsying demurely. Behind her climbed a narrow, winding stair. It warmed my heart to see her in this place, and what a pretty child she looked, with the red torchlight falling on her fair hair and Dalecarlian cheeks and eyes.

"Oh, sir!" she burst out, "take us back to Polenstjerna; oh, take us back, my mistress and me!"

"You must have patience, Greta," I replied, bravely. "It will all come right." Would God I thought so! But before women at least, a man must show a stout heart.

In a chamber at the head of the winding stairs the Princess awaited me, robed in a most wonderful and rich red satin, cunningly devised to reveal every curve and grace of her slender figure. Delilah must have had hair and eyes and a body such as God had given the Princess Rapierska, a loveliness as of the goddesses on her walls, and as soulless. Is there anything more pitiful on God's earth than the eyes of a beautiful woman, eyes of sorrow and knowledge, of refinement, passion, and power, but without a woman's soul? Those dark eyes were blazing with excitement now, making the diamonds crusting the little elephant on her breast seem dull, but there was no excitement in her voice, rather a faint languor in her smile as she greeted me.

"A pleasant room," she laughed, softly, with a wave of her fan, "for the Swedish boors to sack, *n'est-ce pas, mon ami?*"

I was in the boudoir of a great Polish lady, say, rather, of a Parisian duchess. Everything was French—carpets and chairs, tables and cabinets; and the tapestry, with its naked

cupids scattering roses on naked gods and goddesses in a sunny maze of flowers and fruits, had come without a doubt straight from the Gobelins. Above the alcove where stood the *prie-Dieu* hung a large portrait in chalk of his most gracious Majesty Augustus the Strong, and underneath was nailed a most costly carving in ivory of our crucified Lord. I turned away in pain, only to see on the *escritoire* a miniature of the same dark-browed face, framed in gold, and crowned by a jewelled lover's-knot, a gift from his false and royal hands.

"You understand, I believe," she said calmly, "what the position of affairs is."

"I understand this, that the Graf von Polenstjerna is gone on a forlorn hope, and that if he fails nothing can prevent war."

She fanned herself with an astonishing equanimity. "He will fail," was her deliberate answer.

"Princess !"

"And I will tell you why : Firstly,"—she counted on her fingers, verily, I am convinced, that I might see how beautiful her hand was,—“firstly, then, because he has failed to beat the Muscovites ; and, secondly, because when Bengt reaches Grodno he will not find the King of Sweden there.” She leaned back and allowed her smile to die away amongst the tassels of the cushions. I clasped my hands and gasped.

"We are in a desperate strait," she said, softly, "and desperate diseases require desperate remedies. Peace is the only remedy, and we are going to make it."

When she spoke next it was in a low and rapid voice, low, as if she feared even the goddesses on the tapestry might betray her ; rapid, because she could hardly master the excitement that made her eyes pools of lustrous light.

"Yes, we are going to make peace. To-night the Cardinal leaves Warsaw for Cracow ; everyone knows it. But he is not going to Cracow, he is going—to my castle thirty miles from Grodno. There he will meet the King of Sweden,

perhaps one of the Swedish Ministers, and in my castle they will make peace."

I sank back in breathless consternation. The Princess laughed, a laugh the triumphant happiness of which carolled through the room.

"It is all arranged. The King of Sweden is coming with such speed as he alone can make from Wilna ; the Cardinal is coming. In three weeks there will be peace." Again she laughed. "Do not ask," she said, "do not ask how we have done it ; it has been a terrible business. Twice, three times, we had failed, but we have won, won at last, thank God ! and it is not too late. We have gained the Cardinal, we have the word of King Charles that he will come, and he keeps his word, and I—yes, I—have won over the King of Poland. This morning, in the presence of the Cardinal and myself, in this room his Majesty put his signature to the paper giving his Eminence full powers. That paper is now in the escritoire behind you. Before three weeks are out you and I, M. Martin, will see the making of peace, *La Paix des Dames*." She was radiant; not Venus rising from the foam at dawn could have been more radiant and unconquerable.

"You and I ?" I repeated, dully.

"Yes, you and I," she whispered softly. "To-night I too, leave Warsaw for my castle, and you, M. Martin, are coming with me. You and I will see this monster of a King who splashes Swedish countesses with the mud of his horse's hoofs. What will he say to me, I wonder, who will have the honour to be his hostess in Castle Rapierska ? And you will be there, too, for you are going to be the agent of '*La Paix des Dames*.' You were freed from the Königstein to help the women of Poland to make peace. And now the King commands your services, but we, the women of Poland, we do not command, we ask. You cannot, you will not refuse ?"

She had leaned forward, pleading in her flushed face,

pleading in every ripple and curve of that rich red satin robe. The perfume of her presence was wafted over me. I was as Samson shorn of his locks before Delilah. But, thank God ! I had found a coat of mail at Polenstjerna.

“ But what can I do ? ” I hardly knew what I was saying. “ Why, the Graf—— ”

Her body stiffened. “ The Graf, for reasons that I cannot explain, is impossible. No, M. Martin, this is a business of the greatest secrecy. We must have someone who can watch for us if need be, who can go for us to the King, whom no man can bribe, and no woman can seduce. Such men are rare. We have chosen M. Martin, and M. Martin will not fail us. Peace for Poland is at stake, peace for Sweden,—you cannot, will not, refuse ? ”

Princess though she was, she rose and knelt on the footstool at my feet, and asked me with her eyes.

“ Princess ! ” I cried, in the greatest distress, “ I beg—— ”

“ You will come ? ” she whispered.

“ Let me think,” I said, desperately. “ I am so dazed that—— ” I paced up and down till my turbid thoughts gradually cleared.

“ Does my Lord Bengt know ? ” I asked.

“ No, it was only settled yesterday. But he will be aiding us ; he will stop the advance of the Swedes. We sent a courier after him, and before long he will know. I can swear he will approve.”

“ And his Excellency ? ”

“ His Excellency is on the right side. He is working with us. You see,” she said, smiling, “ we have thought of everything.”

“ But if his Majesty approves, and his Excellency, and the Cardinal, oh ! pardon my dullness, but why all this secrecy ? ”

She made an impatient gesture. “ Can you not see,” she said, “ how we are placed ? There is a party, the party fed by Muscovite gold, which will fight to the end. They would

ruin our scheme if they could, and it is so easy. A word, a whisper, and a few hundreds of the Oginskis and their friends would fall on the Swedes at Grodno, on the Swedish outposts in half a dozen places, and then King Charles would not hear of peace. No, no, not a whisper must reach them till peace is made."

"And the terms, Princess——"

"The King of Poland will keep his throne, he will ally with Sweden against the Czar——"

"My Lord Bengt, who knows the King of Sweden, said that that would not be enough. His master is bent on——"

"We are provided against that." She came close to me. "We have something that the King of Sweden desires more than to drive the King of Poland from his throne. We will give him that. We will give him—Patkul."

I started back. My eye was riveted in a nameless fear on the portrait of Augustus the Strong.

"Yes, my friend, he shall have that double traitor, and justice shall follow peace. If need be, I will help to bind him myself. The King at last sees the truth and he has consented. It is Patkul," she said grimly, "who will make peace for us."

Revenge shone fierce and hot in her face. It was a masterstroke worthy of my Lord Bengt, and it was the work of the woman who ruled Poland. Yes, this would be a woman's peace.

"It was that man," she cried, passionately, "that man Patkul who is the cause of all our troubles; it was he who suggested the plot in Sweden,—let loose this cursed war. I have always hated him, with his fawning ways and his black, dirty heart. Had they taken my advice, there would have been no war. They would not listen to me then, but they are wringing their hands now. The King sees I was right. Patkul came to us as a traitor and he will die as a traitor, and no one will regret him. It is we, the women of Warsaw,

whom you laugh at, who have crushed the Muscovite at last. And now, M. Martin, you will come? You cannot refuse?"

I stood in the greatest distress. How could I leave my Lady even to make peace?

"I know what you are thinking," the Princess said, dropping into her lisp, "you are thinking, as you always are, first and last of my Lady,"—she mimicked my English manner of speech. Then she put a jewelled hand on my shoulder and whispered, "My Lady is coming, too."

"Princess!"

She burst out laughing. "I want her to come, and I want you to persuade her." I stared at her in helpless bewilderment.

"Do you understand that you owe your freedom to my cousin?" she said, no longer jesting.

"I heard his Majesty say so."

"You are perversity itself. If you were my woman I should have slapped you for that speech. But this is no laughing matter. When my cousin fled from Sweden to me, she promised Bengt never to visit the Court, and for eighteen months she remained absolutely *perdue* in my castle, she and that minx of a wench of hers who can make love to a Pole though she does not know one syllable of our tongue. And one day, she heard that you, her tutor, were a prisoner of state in the Königstein. Patkul told her, I am sure,—Patkul, who hates me and would drive me from the Court because I hate him,—and not all my tears could keep her from coming straight to Warsaw to implore the King to set you free. For you she broke her promise to Bengt, and you, M. Martin, are the cause of her being here."

"My God!" I cried, brokenly.

"It is the truth. She told the King that she would die rather than that an innocent man who had saved her honour at the cost of his own should perish like a felon. You will not thank me when I say that I did everything to stop her. You are free to-day because——"

I sat down stunned.

"She made me promise that I would tell no one. Bengt does not know. He thinks it was I who—I—I, my God!"

I sat with bowed head. Verily, the iron had entered into my soul.

"Such is fate, M. Martin," her words oozed out like bitter drops. "Ah! I have no reason to thank you for what you have caused. What has been freedom to you has been bondage and anguish for me."

"No, Princess," I cried, "it is not I, it is they who have made M. Martin, poor fool! their tool who have done this. And, please God, they will have their reward, if not in this world, in the next."

"The next!" she repeated, with a mocking moan. "I wonder if there is a next. You and my cousin believe in these things—But we cannot talk of that. It is of my cousin that we must think. M. Martin, you were at the ball of his Eminence. Would you not save her from *that*?"

"Your Highness knows," I said, coldly, "that there can be no danger of that—" I stopped. How could I even speak of such things to the Princess Rapirska, of all women?

"Ah! you are confident," she said, fiercely, "but neither you nor Bengt really know this Court, nor what a woman's heart is. No man can. Do you know what it is to be born beautiful and noble, born to the greatness of beauty and birth; to become friendless, despised, rejected, and then to be worshipped, adored of all?—you men cannot know what *that* is to a woman, a beautiful girl with life in her blood. You do not know—my God! how can you?—what it is to be loved by the King, my King!"

The torrent of her passion overwhelmed me.

"Princess," I cried, in anguish, "do you mean——?"

She laid her hand on my arm. "I do mean," she said, grimly, "if you would save her, there is only one way. *Ebba* must leave Warsaw. The King must never see her

again." She clenched her hands. "She must not, she shall not, shall not yield."

I was wrestling with such terrible thoughts. If my Lady went she could never be cleared of the charges that had made her Fröken Polenstjerna ; if she stayed neither I nor Bengt would wish to clear her. What in heaven's name was my duty,—that duty which had been given me as a sacred charge ?

"You have such a chance," the Princess was saying, "as will not be given you again. I am doing this for the King, all for the King. I can save him and I will. I only ask that I may keep his love. And I would save Ebba, too ; I speak frankly. If we can make peace, I shall keep the King's love and save her, too. Let me give the King peace and he will remember past days ; he will make me his wife, as he promised."

She had revealed to my gaze the inmost recesses of a woman's soul, the soul of one sort of woman, and I recoiled. What was it, I asked myself, in King Augustus—false, treacherous, ungenerous—that made high-born and low-born women alike ready to sacrifice life and honour for his royal sake? Aurora von Königsmark, the Princess Rapierska, the Princess Lubomirska, a dozen others, as the scandal of the Court told truly, even when no longer loved, were ready to put all to the touch for this King and his perjured love. It was not the loyalty of a nation laying the homage of a nation's devotion at the arbitrary disposal of the master who was the incarnation of a nation's hopes and dreams, as it was with King Charles, whom men followed blindly, although they knew him to be a man who could sin and err as other men. Did the secret lie in kingship as made by God ? Was it the king or the man to whom this power, awful and irresistible, was given ? The Princess could not tell me, nor did she know. It sufficed for her that the reward of success was the King's love.

"What is it you would have me do ?" I asked, hoarsely.

"Ebba," the Princess replied, "cannot make up her mind. I ask you to persuade her to come with us. Do it, M. Martin, for my sake, who have tried to help you ; for Ebba's sake, who set you free."

"If the Countess Polenstjerna goes," I said, slowly, "she can never become Countess again in Sweden. I have learned——"

"Ah! you know of the papers," she interrupted, quickly. "You are mistaken. If she stays here the King will only use them in order to——" she stopped. "Good, you understand. You and she must choose. You will not believe me, but I say that I love her and I would save her. And I also love the King. If she does not go, I do not go, and there will be no peace."

I began to see what it all meant.

"Good God ! M. Martin," the Princess burst out, "why do you hesitate ? Ebba does not love the King. What I am doing for the King is what you would do for the woman whom you loved, if you really loved her. Deny it and you may rebuke me, as the priests do."

"I am no friend to priests, Madam——"

The Princess laughed scornfully. "You have already dishonoured yourself for her sake, and you would do it again cheerfully. But what a man may do for the woman whom he loves a woman may not do for the man whom she loves. *Diantre !* that is the justice of men. But let it pass. I accept your code of honour. If you would save my cousin from breaking it, you will persuade her to come with us. I need not speak more plainly."

"I beseech your Highness to speak as plainly as you can——"

The Princess looked me full in the face. "Have you seen the papers you speak of ?" she asked. "Well, I have, M. Martin, and when you see them and Ebba sees them, you will see that she will have to choose between her own honour and the dishonour of the man whom she loves. Pah ! I

think nothing of what Bengt has done ; he did it because he loved her, and a man or a woman may do much worse than that for love. Ebba can only save him if—" she paused, the pause was more terrible than any words ; "and if you would save her from *that*, then persuade her to come with us. It is the only way. She must never see the King again, or he will tell her the truth about Bengt. You can save her now ; and you must trust to the future for the rest."

The abyss I had feared yawned at my feet. "Yes," I said, setting my teeth, "Let me see her, Madam."

"And you will persuade her to come?" she asked, quickly.

"Oh, Madam, I cannot tell, really, I cannot tell. I must think——"

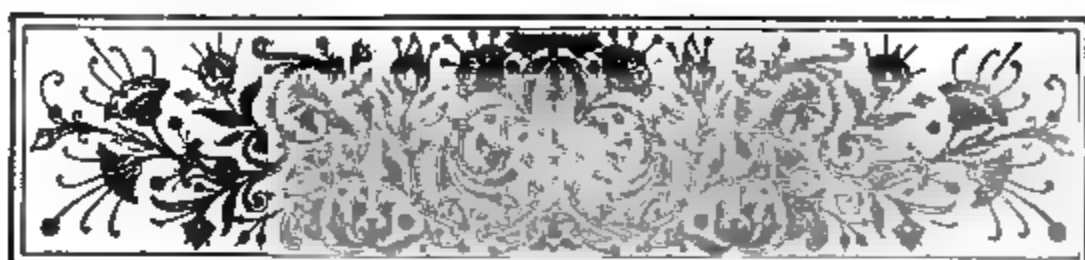
She stamped her foot impatiently. "So much for M. Martin's protestations of service!" she murmured. "There are many men in Warsaw and Dresden who would risk the Königstein to be closeted with the poor Princess Rapierska. M. Martin thinks so little of it that he cannot even affect to be polite."

"Princess !" I cried in remorse.

But she only shrugged her magnificent shoulders. Then she rang a silver hand-bell and sank into her chair.

"Greta," she said, lispingly, when the door opened, "M. Martin will wait upon the Fröken Countess."

I turned to her truly penitent for my boorishness. "Go," she said, "go!" and I left her softly fanning herself. Nor, to tell the truth, did I very much care whether she was angry or not.



CHAPTER VII

M. MARTIN DECIDES AND MAKES A PROMISE

AH ! how different the apartment at the foot of the stairs looked, now that my Lady filled it with her sweet and gracious youth. Warsaw, its intrigues, its unholy passions, and its black, conspiring hearts, melted away as if under an enchanter's wand. M. Martin was once more about to talk with his mistress as he had talked in the old and happy far-off days when Greta's spinning-wheel and the sea-birds came from the sunlit sea to listen to the lessons at Polenstjerna.

"Countess, had I known you were waiting—" I began, humbly.

"Waiting?" she repeated; "doubtless it is the privilege of woman to wait, but I have not been waiting. It is only this moment that I learned it was you who was here. What brings you to us to-day?"

"Then you were not aware that I had been closeted with the Princess for more than an hour?" I asked, in sincere surprise.

"More than an hour?" Her smile died away. "Ah!" she drew a deep breath, "she has asked you to go with her?"

I bowed. "And you have consented?"

"No." My Lady stared at me in astonishment. "I cannot consent until I know, Countess, whether you go too. Did you not know that the Princess was about to ask me?"

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"No," was the answer in a very low and troubled voice. "But I am not going. No, I cannot go."

"Was it your wish that I should leave Warsaw without—" I could not finish. She suddenly held out her hands, looking at me now bravely, as became my Lady.

"My friend," she said, "it had been better that we had thus parted. I have already caused you much suffering. Believe me, a woman can best show her gratitude by—" the words forsook her. I took her hands in silence. I had sworn never again to speak of what was never so much in my heart as at this moment. But God knows it was hard. "Yes, my friend," she said, "I had written to say so. But you cannot think that Ebba Polenstjerna would not humbly accept your loyal service? A woman who loves owes something to—to—a heart that loves too. Believe me, there are requests which every woman may be proud to ask from her friends, which she cannot ask from—"

I dropped her hands, unable even to whisper a protest.

"You understand?" she said, gently.

"Yes, I understand." And for a brief space there was silence.

"Supposing," I said at length, "supposing, Countess, that some three months ago someone had said, 'You are breaking your pledge.'"

"Ah!" she cried, "the Princess has told you, and she promised, she promised——"

"I will say this," I continued: "Until M. Martin knows you are safe he will not leave Warsaw, nor will he stay if you leave it."

"If I do not go," she murmured, "the Princess says there will be no peace, and if I do go, I am sure there will be no peace." She flung back her arms with a moan. "Oh! if the King were not the King!"

What a world of misery lay in that cruel sentence, and upstairs another unhappy woman had said the same in her own language.

"But his Majesty is aware that you are going, going to make peace?"

My Lady looked up, terror in her eyes. "The King knows that the Princess is going," she whispered, "but he does not know that the Princess will take me with her."

I started back. The curtain was being lifted and what lay behind it was not pleasant to see.

"If only I were a man," she moaned, "a man who is strong and brave! Oh! a man can never know, thank God! how puny and vile a woman's spirit can be." She rocked herself to and fro in the great chair.

I had nothing to answer, but the light was slowly breaking in on the darkness.

"You cannot guess," she said suddenly, "why I would have had you go away in silence. It was not what I said. I was a woman when I said that, the true woman, who cannot face the truth. No, no, it was because—because I feared that you would cease to think me what your eyes have told me you think I am."

I shook my head angrily.

"It is the truth," she said. "I might be Countess Polenstjerna to-morrow. Do you know that?"

"Yes, I know that."

My Lady laid her hand on my arm as if she would read, yet dared not, what was in my mind.

"And I also know," I answered her piteous gaze, "that you are already Grefvinna Polenstjerna, and have been so ever since you lay in your cradle. No king, Madam, can take that away from you, nor can any king give it you back, as if it were a bauble to be bartered and chaffered for in the market-places of men. God alone made you a Grefvinna and a Polenstjerna, as He made you a woman; God alone in His wisdom can order these things as seems best to Him."

She was walking to and fro, hardly heeding my words.

"It is a pity," she cried, passionately, "that you were not born a woman and a Polenstjerna. It would not be so easy

for you to speak as you do. I was proud of my race, of my title, of my place in my nation. I was courted, the mistress of what my forefathers had won by their service to Sweden. And then I was cast out, an exile, downtrodden, stained in the eyes of all with treason,—treason, my God ! to Sweden!—a worthless woman, hardly to be pitied, pitied,” she repeated bitterly, “by the honest women of Sweden, and to-day I know that to-morrow I can be again all that is mine by right, all that God has given me. Is that a little thing, a little thing for me, born Grefvinna Polenstjerna, who love my castle as my life ? Is it ?” she asked, fiercely.

“No, Madam, it is not a little thing. And you may well ask me that question, for it is I who have brought you to this.”

“You !” she exclaimed.

“Yes, I, alas ! I would God you had left me in the Königstein. Why, oh, why, did you not leave me there ?”

“It was impossible,” she replied, proudly. “If it had been Bengt I could have done it, but you, you ! it was impossible.”

Was not that an amazing thought ? Yet it rang so true. Love made all the difference. And men can be found with the experience of my Lord Bengt who doubt whether the passion for justice and the truth can be found in a woman’s heart !

“Tell me,” said my Lady helplessly, “what I must do.”

“I do not trust the King,” I answered vehemently. Was I to speak plainly, and to my Lady ? God avert that !

“You shall be told the truth,” she said, “even if I forfeit your respect for ever. Last night the King was here, here in this room. He was on his knees where you are now standing. He loves me as Bengt and you do, M. Martin.”

“No !” I said angrily. “No !”

“Why should he not ? Because he loves me, he will make me Grefvinna Polenstjerna to-morrow.”

“God forbid !” I dashed my chair down in my fury.

"He has promised on the honour of a King. It may mean everything to Sweden, for he has also promised to abandon the Czar, and to make terms as Sweden demands."

The treacherous royal liar ! I was beside myself with rage.

"That is not all," my Lady said, with a terrible earnestness. "There are here in Warsaw papers of two kinds: proofs of my innocence, and papers alas ! of the kind that made me Fröken Polenstjerna—forgeries that will ruin Bengt. Bengt's enemies will use them if peace is not made, and Bengt will be ruined—ruined by papers that no man can prove false, as they could not prove those false that were found at Polenstjerna about me. My aunt wrote them, and Bengt—" she could not finish.

I waited, gnashing my teeth, yet hear my Lady out I must.

"His Majesty has sworn to me on his knees that—that he will burn the papers that will ruin Bengt, and he will give me those that will prove me innocent, when peace is made. And if there is no peace the enemies of Bengt will triumph."

I wrung my hands. The damnable, devilish net that the Princess had warned me of had now been laid. Was there no escape ?

"That is not all," I heard my Lady's hard voice saying, "for if there is no peace you, M. Martin, will go back to the Königstein for ever."

Ah ! would I ? We would see ; we would see.

"Ah !" she cried, "what is one woman, one woman's honour, to the peace and safety of two countries, to the honour of the man whom she loves ?" The voice was now the voice and the face was the face of the Princess Rapierska. My path was becoming quite clear.

"If I go," said my Lady, "go without the King's consent, go when I have promised Bengt to stay here, there will be no peace, only ruin for us all, for him who has—" She turned to me with outstretched hands. "What am I to do ?"

"The King—" I began hotly, when my Lady stopped me.

“The King has promised,” she said, “promised to make me his wife, his queen.”

Dead silence. I clenched my hands to gag my tongue. The damnable royal liar! My Lady sat down, utterly crushed. A terrible fear stabbed me.

“What answer did you make?” I asked, scarcely able to whisper.

“Answer!” my Lady repeated, “there is to be no answer now. The King trusts to the honour of the Countess Polenstjerna. He will come for his answer when peace is made. Can I, dare I go?”

“Does the Princess know what you have told me?”

“No,” she said, in a low voice, “I dare not tell her. It would kill her. There would be no peace, and Bengt—” she rose again and pleaded with me. “M. Martin, you must go and make peace and leave me here.”

“The Princess will not leave Warsaw without you.”

“You must persuade her, you will persuade her? Do this for me and——”

Once again she laid her hand on my arm, pleading for Bengt, her love, and Sweden. I put away my Lady's hand roughly. I could have reviled her at that moment. She shrank back, cowering, and flung herself into the great chair, too stricken even for tears of pride. It had come to this!—dishonour for her, if so be that Sweden might have peace and Bengt be saved. It should not be; before God, it should not be! Better far that my Lady should die a traitress, that there should be war to the crack of doom to hurl this King of lies and lust from his throne, than that peace should be purchased at this price. I looked at her bowed figure in my anger and my pity. A woman's love striving with a woman's conscience—dear God! it should not be. Before the devilish mockery of the nets that Satan had laid for us I was impotent, dumb. Bengt, whom my mistress would save, whom she believed to be innocent, Bengt was guilty. The documents which would ruin him

were no forgeries, no lies. They were the truth, and he knew it, and the Princess knew it, and I knew it. The one woman who did not know it was the unhappy girl who in the pureness of her heart believed him innocent and would purchase silence by her own dishonour. She to whom God had given a pure heart and this great love that made the sunlight of her girl's life, would baffle Him whose eyes were upon the truth ! This, too, was the fruit of a mother's ambition, the fruit of a man's ambition and a man's love. Were we never to cease reaping the harvest of ambition, to cease earning the wages of sin, till life was done ?

I paced up and down. In the boudoir of the Princess my heart had revolted from her plan, the plan of a woman who would sacrifice all to the selfish passion of keeping the love of a king, a king of lust and lies. But now I knew the Princess was right. There was no other way. She would balk the King, make peace in spite of him, and she would keep him to herself. She should, yes, by God ! she should !

My Lady was looking at me. When I stopped pacing to and fro, a shiver passed over her.

"What am I to do ?" she kept repeating, like a weary child.

"You will come, Madam, with the Princess and myself." My Lady stared at me dully, and shook her head.

"You will come," I insisted. God gave me strength to speak with a wonderful firmness.

My Lady rose, a hot flush in her pale cheeks. "I asked," she replied, haughtily, "for the advice of a friend, not for the commands of my tutor."

"They are not my commands, Madam ; if my Lord Bengt were here he would say the same. Your father would say what I say."

"You command me," she said, coldly, "to ruin my house. I am surprised, M. Martin, that you, of all men, should do this."

"Ruin ! what is the ruin that you fear, Countess, to——"

"We will not discuss it, if you please," my Lady interrupted.

"I beseech you to listen to me. You have said, Madam, that it is hard to be branded a traitress by the honest women of Sweden. I honour, God knows, the opinion of the women of Sweden as much as any man, and I would on their behalf ask you this: What will the women of Sweden say when you stay here and his Majesty to-morrow makes you Countess Polenstjerna?"

"M. Martin!" cried my Lady, passionately.

"Ah! Madam, I do not command you," I said, earnestly, "I do but tell you the message of the Grefvinna Ebba, on the walls of the hall at Polenstjerna, to the Grefvinna Ebba in Warsaw."

Dead silence. Slowly, very slowly, the haughty flush died out of my Lady's cheeks. An infinite yearning stole into her eyes. She held out her hands.

"Thank you, my friend," she said, with a stifled, happy sob, "thank you. I ask your pardon; you are right. You shall help Ebba Polenstjerna to remain Ebba Polenstjerna. I will come."

Thank God for it! I could have sobbed, too. The sweet and tender mistress whom I had taught in the summer gardens of her castle by the northern sea, the woman who had given me a new spirit and made life lovely for me, her tutor; the Ebba Polenstjerna whom I had lost in this vile room, leaped into her face and swept away the devil's lies with which Warsaw had cozened her womanhood. The truth had won and it mattered not now whether peace or war, the Königstein or King Eric's Tower, awaited us. For we were no longer in bondage to the wages of sin.

"Hugo," she said, softly, "my friend and my brother, Ebba Polenstjerna thanks you from her heart. There must be no more Countess now. You have more than a right, nay, you are one of us."

My heart gave a mighty throb and stopped. But if my

Lady of her goodness could condescend so far, M. Martin, yeoman born, could also remember who and what he was. For what is love if it be not linked with duty?

"Madam, I thank you," I said, my voice breaking, strive as I might, "but if you please, M. Martin will remain M. Martin, and the Countess Polenstjerna the Countess Polenstjerna. A year hence, when peace is made, when the Grefvinna Polenstjerna once more may walk on her Terrace where blow the Baltic winds, M. Martin will learn to obey in this and other things. But to-day he asks your permission to forget."

For a brief moment my pride had called out hers, and then she understood.

"My friend," she replied, softly, "let it be as you say. Yet I would trust you——"

I knelt at her feet supremely happy. God had indeed been good to me. He had given me a wondrous strength and now a great reward. For there was that in her eyes which told me that had things been otherwise, I might perchance still have been in the Königstein.

But Warsaw, alas! left us no time to spend even on our knees thanking God for His mercies. Work to be done which brooked no delay awaited us.

"M. Martin," my Lady said, "I put myself in your hands, but," she held out her arms imploringly, "do not, I beseech you, think of me. Promise me that you will save Bengt, who is not here to defend himself."

King Eric's Tower, Kungsör, and the Hall of Polenstjerna rose before me.

"I promise," I said. To have refused in the presence of that dear face pleading for mercy and truth in her great sorrow was more than I had strength to do. Maybe I did wrong; but I felt happier as I strode up the stairs. I had torn out of my heart the lust for revenge, the revenge which had brought us all to this pass, and it was my Lady who had done it for me. Let God—not I—whose eyes are upon

the truth, judge my Lord Bengt. And as I entered the boudoir of the Princess, a peace that no man could take away from me lay upon my spirit.

The Princess sprang forward to meet me. "Quick! what do you bring?" she panted.

"The Countess Polenstjerna comes with us to make peace," I answered.

"Ah!" Triumph flamed in her face and body. She sank into her chair, half sobbing, half laughing. In a trice all the woe was gone; nothing but an intoxicating radiance shone in her face. Her beauty was immortal, irresistible, but she had no soul, and I wondered how I could ever have felt fear or temptation in her presence.

"Sit down, M. Martin," she said. "I would look at you, for you can do things that I could have wagered no man could do."

"Your Highness is pleased to jest."

"At Dresden," she pursued, with the gayest of gay smiles, "your secret baffled me, and, I know, women and men, too. What is it? How is it that you can always make a woman do what you want? Severe M. Martin, who knows as much about women as a frowsy hermit; M. Martin, who frowns if a woman shows that she has an ankle, has somehow bewitched the hearts of those two wenches of mine. Why, they would run through Warsaw bare-legged if you ordered them, and both Elsa and Kätchen tell me that you always look at them as if they were not girls at all, but mere puppets in petticoats. For two days I have been arguing with that stiff-necked cousin of mine, and I could not touch her proud, stubborn heart. M. Martin goes, and in half an hour she is as obedient as a maid in a convent to her confessor. What is it?"

"I must leave your Highness to judge," I said stiffly, for I do not like being mocked on these topics even by princesses. "I can only say that I hope I never forget myself so far as to order any lady of quality."

The Princess shook her fan at me. "You have forgotten," she said, in the most rollicking good humour, "the room in 'The Trumpeter of the Taschenberg.' And we, the women of quality, endure it. *Mon Dieu!* it is amazing."

"I would remind you, Princess, that——"

"I have it," she replied, tossing me an audacious curtsy. "M. Martin's secret is to treat the serving-wench as though they were women of quality, and the women of quality as he treats—the Princess Rapierska," and she saluted me again with a mocking witchery that would have conquered the heart of any king, even King Charles.

I was in despair. Would nothing make her serious again?

"His Majesty does not know," I began, "that the Countess Polenstjerna goes with us?"

A flash of terror smote the radiance out of her brilliant eyes. "Hush!" she whispered. "Hush! Not a word! I have arranged all that. The King left Warsaw this afternoon. My husband went with him. They go to Marienburg to wait till peace is made. It is given out that his Majesty would meet a party of the Polish nobles to debate on the affairs of the kingdom and collect money and troops for the war. That," she said, with a peculiar emphasis, "is to hoodwink the Muscovites. His Excellency goes with them, and Patkul. We have arranged that his Majesty will be kept amused. The Prince, my husband, knows how to do that better than any man. You can trust him that his Majesty will not count the hours till peace is made."

I had been at Dresden, and I understood. "And these accursed documents?" I inquired, bluntly.

"I have not forgotten them." The Princess laughed. "Those that affect Ebba are in the keeping of the King. When peace is made I will give them to you, to show you that the Princess Rapierska can be grateful, and you and no one else shall give them to the Countess Polenstjerna. I promise you that."

I kissed her hand in a passion of remorse.

“And the others?” I inquired, anxiously.

“The others,” she replied, “are in a cabinet in his Excellency’s house. To-night Fritz—you know my faithful Fritz?—will stumble, lamp in hand, and pouf!” she waved her arm.

I smiled grimly. Would he? We should see. Perhaps M. Martin might have something to give my Lord Bengt or my Lady, something that had been given him because he treated a waiting-wench as though she were a woman of quality.

As I took my leave the Princess slipped in front of me, a royal roguery in her happy dark eyes. “I have a foot,” she whispered coyly, “and a very pretty shoe. Elsa tells me that you can put on a woman’s slipper more daintily than any wench. You shall show me, too. I insist.”

She raised her robe with more than a dancer’s freedom. If the Princess was as vain as Kätchen of her ankle, she had a still better right.

“That slipper,” she cried, with Delilah’s modesty, “has been kissed by a King, and M. Martin hesitates——”

I knelt down. “Oh, fie!” she cried, “if my Lady could only see you!” and she suddenly dropped her dress. “Oh, fie! Monsieur Tutor! But when peace is made you shall drink from that slipper, I swear, to ‘*La Paix des Dames.*’”

“It is a pledge,” I answered gaily, “and never again shall it be kissed by a King, for M. Martin will keep it.”

And in the radiance of her enchanting laughter I stole away.





CHAPTER VIII

LA PAIX DES DAMES

MY instructions were to start at ten o'clock, and it was eight when I reached the inn. Only two hours, but what a two hours they were, hours of excitement, suspense, fears, despairs, joys, hopes !

Just at this moment those terrible wheels of the Fates had ceased to whirr, and in the lull we were to run a last desperate race against the ebbing sand in the hour-glass. Could we, would we do it ? We must. Fortune had made us gamblers, playing with the thrones of kings, the lives and loves and hatreds of nations, and the revenge of human hearts for our counters ; we had staked all, all, on a single throw, and if we failed, it was ruin to all.

We were marching towards Polenstjerna. But were we marching towards the truth ? In those moments of stern silence when a man is alone with his own soul and with the God who made it, it is not the fear of what men may do that stills the beating of his heart. Muscovite and Pole, kings and princesses, Königsteins and castles of happy enchantment—what are they when they match themselves against the questions of a man's soul, questions that an hour of silent agony such as this no fear, no hope, no joy, can stifle or answer ; I stood in that deserted parlour in Warsaw and my Lady faded away ; an immeasurable vastness encompassed me about ; I, mortal man with an immortal soul, was in the presence of the vision of eternity, and I could hear nothing

but that one small question, "You are marching towards Polenstjerna, but are you marching towards the truth?" How often in the bitter past whose fruits we were now reaping had I not been convinced that I was marching towards the truth, and it was not so. And now we, the Princess, my Lady, my Lord Bengt, were seeking other things, but we were not seeking the truth. In the grip of Destiny, as we called it, we were seeking the honour of a woman whom we loved, we were seeking peace for the nations of whose blood we were, but we were not seeking the truth. Fate and Destiny! the names with which strong and weak alike cozen their minds and bewitch their wills. It was not Fate and Destiny that had brought us to this pass. God is not mocked; it was He whose eyes are upon the truth who made and unmade the kingdoms of this world, who held the lives and souls of us immortal men and women in the hollow of His hand. And if we failed in our duty to the truth as we marched towards Polenstjerna, we would fail as miserably to-day as we had failed in the past. Ah, yes! we would earn the wages of sin and reap the fruits of a man's and a woman's ambition until we had sought with our tears the truth, and found it on our knees.

Half-past nine! Warsaw lay like a city drugged with sleep. The streets that had been so noisy with the fever and the fret of impotent human effort were as still as the Acre of God in the little churchyard of the village whence my father and grandfather had gone out to fight for the truth under the Lord General Cromwell. What was that? Through the stupefying silences of the inn I heard the furry rustle of a Polish woman's cloak and skirts. It was Elsa!

We met in the doorway.

"I have the papers," she panted; "they are here."

She handed me from under her cloak a large white cover. The dim light fell on a huge seal, the royal seal of Poland.

I took her hand in silence, choking; I could not even utter thanks. Ha! We would win now; we would march

towards Polenstjerna and the truth. I could have thrown up my hat in sheer mad ecstasy.

"I cannot stay, sir," Elsa whispered. She seized my hand and kissed it on her knees. The tears of a waiting-wench wet my fingers. "I am so glad, so glad," she murmured. "May God give you, M. Martin, all that you desire!"

"Elsa!" I cried, but she was already gone.

I went sadly back to the parlour. In a frenzy of excitement I tore off the seal of the packet and ripped the contents forth. My God! what was this? Twenty papers at least, but all—all blank sheets! Not a word, not a syllable of writing on a single one, not on one! I wiped the cold perspiration from my brow. No, there was not a trace of ink or pen from first to last on these accursed sheets. The packet with the royal seal contained only clean waste paper.

Sick and dizzy I tottered into a chair. We were fooled, tricked, betrayed. The cover had been put into the cabinet, the real papers which contained the truth were in God knows whose keeping. In vain I stared at that mocking seal, bewitched. Bah! the discovery had come too late. We could not turn back now, and, papers or no papers, we could still make peace. Thank God! my Lord Bengt's guilt or innocence could not prevent us from achieving our ends. I thrust the blank sheets angrily into the stove and with the cold perspiration of that cruel discovery still on my brow, rode out into the night. My heart cried out for the Graf, for Kätchen. I might as well have cried for the moon staring down at me from a peacefully frosty sky.

Once clear of the inn everything was in my favour. I crossed the river and rode through the suburb of Praga. I was once more riding on the King's business, and I had the King's pass. At every step my spirits rose. I was alone, but I was my own master, and, papers or no papers, I would win, for I was riding to freedom and Polenstjerna.

Within an hour I had pulled up outside what in this

wretched land they are pleased to call a hostelry. I had kept my tryst and so had the Princess. Before the door stood a great coach with eight horses; round it was gathered a chattering group of men, some on foot, with torches flaring to and fro, some mounted and armed. Within the hostelry swarmed men gabbling in Polish. From their appearance you would justly have taken them for as desperate and motley a crew of banditti as ever scared a traveller out of his wits and his purse. They were armed to the teeth with short lances, sabres, and pistols, some, I observed with astonishment, with bows and arrows, and beneath their long fur cloaks flashed the steel of a corselet. But what chiefly made them so fierce and appalling were the skins of bears and leopards, the wings of storks and cranes and other birds, stuck in careless ferocity all over their attire. From beneath their helmets, similarly adorned, gleamed their dark eyes and sallow, shaven cheeks. Mounted on small wiry horses draped in fur or in the hides of wild beasts likewise plastered over with feathers, they wheeled this way and that, jabbering and gesticulating. And my Lord Bengt might well have envied the consummate grace and ease with which they controlled and guided their steeds. "The first horsemen in the world, my bookworm," the Graf had once called them, and in these matters the Graf was a soldier who knew what he was talking about. These were the retainers of the Princess, the escort that was to guard us in our journey from the attentions of the freebooters, with whom war had caused Poland to swarm, and from—which God forbid!—the sword of the men in sheepskins, the advance skirmishers of the Swedish cavalry.

"The faithful M. Martin," the Princess cried gaily, as I dropped from the saddle to kiss her hand at the coach door. "I had begun to think someone had eaten you, for you are only half an hour before the time. You will find Mademoiselle la Comtesse yonder in that room. Go and keep her company until I have finished giving my orders."

I plunged promptly into the hovel of a hostelry. The entrance, strewn with dirty straw, was choked with men dressed as the men outside ; it reeked of dirt, bad brandy, and burnt Hungarian wine. The retainers were jabbering hideously as they gulped down their beastly stirrup-cups.

A small door on the left, slightly ajar, led to what must be the room where my Lady was. I was on the point of tapping when a stifled cry from within reached my dazed ears, and I burst in without ceremony. My Lady in her furs was standing in the centre of a tiny apartment, lighted by a single wretched tallow dip. She was gazing earnestly at the door, her eyes as the eyes of a woman in fever.

" M. Martin ! " she exclaimed, faintly.

" Countess, what is wrong ? "

" It was nothing," she repeated, pettishly. " I think I was frightened at being alone, and I—I thought I would call for Greta."

I stood silent at the reproach.

" M. Martin," she asked, suddenly, " did you see any-one in the passage ? "

I laughed. " Oh ! yes, about twenty men, perhaps thirty."

My Lady tried to laugh, but the laugh stifled itself. An icy wind seemed to sweep across the noisome straw, and the tallow dip flared wildly. A great, a mysterious fear shivered itself into my bones.

" My friend," she said, offering me a trembling hand, " I am very foolish, but are you quite sure that — that you saw — no — woman out there ? "

" Save the Princess, I am quite sure I have seen no woman."

" Then I must have been dreaming. We will not talk of it any more." She glanced round the room as if she still feared to see something. " Take me to the coach," she murmured, quickly ; " it is hateful in here."

In the passage she stopped to whisper, "Is it too late to turn back now?"

"Yes, Countess, I fear it is too late." Again I felt that icy wind blowing with the breath of an unseen, unknown, unearthly world. My high spirits oozed away. Bah! I was still chilled with my discovery at the inn.

The Princess insisted on my riding with them in the coach, and my Lady begged it, too, so earnestly that much against my will I yielded. The troopers came clattering out, mounted, and we were off.

Three nights and two days we lumbered unceasingly forward, never stopping save to change horses, and on these occasions the Princess was volubly urgent. Not a minute, I can swear, did we waste, and nothing happened. The journey was as dull as a journey could be. Half a dozen times we stuck fast and after a vast amount of swearing and jabbering got free; three times we were all but upset; half a dozen times the bridges over which we were creaking and swaying nearly gave way,—that was all. We crossed several rivers and many streams, we passed many towns and villages—towns, forsooth! In England we should have termed them, for the most part, a heap of hovels. We met no one, positively no one; for, save the wretched, starved boors, who did not count, the land seemed desolate. How far we had actually travelled I should not like to guess, but by the middle of the third day we must have covered not less than fifty leagues. But I was so crushed by the remorseless monotony that I did not care to inquire.

The Princess was splendid. Her tongue never flagged, her smile was always radiant, her dark eyes lustrous as the sea in the shimmer of the dawn. Morning, midday, and evening she laughed and chattered, jested and quipped, as if it had been she who was the girl, as if this journey was naught but a gay frolic in the season of May. And she made me gay, too, against my will, until I almost fancied I was a schoolboy playing truant.

It was only in the tedious watches of the long nights, when no sound but the jarring of the harness and the straining of the horses broke the solemn stillness, that I could fall a victim to the black doubts and fears which crawled out and filled the air. And if I strove to exorcise them, to bid the defiance of youth to cankering care, a faint sigh from the corner where my Lady slept would always set my heart throbbing with new aches.

The coach had stuck fast for the twentieth time. I sprang out to help, and the Princess and my Lady darted after me. The dusk was already on us, the air thick and damp with a coming thaw. A clinging mist lay over the plain.

"Courage, *mon ami!*" said the Princess, as I stood staring ahead, trying to penetrate the gloom. "Courage, *mon ami!* look yonder, we are at home."

Following her hand I could just make out a dark pile rising up like some vast giant, shadowy, mysterious, and terrible. In the thick air red lights gleamed, and disappeared, and gleamed again. "Yonder is the castle, my castle," she cried blithely; "in another hour we shall be there."

We should not be ready for another ten minutes, so I walked forward to study the ground. In front of me the plain stretched on and on, descending slowly to the dim line of sky and land on which the castle stood, bleak, vast, defiant, wreathed in curling vapour. Behind it ran a river whose course was marked by the stunted, bare trees. On my left the plain rose gradually, ending in an immeasurable tract of forest completely blotting out the view. To the right again woods extended as far as the eye could pierce. What lay beyond these limitless forests no man could have guessed, nor were they confined to this side of the river. On the opposite bank also the ground rose, and was lost in belt upon belt of wood. North and east and west, in and beyond those misty forests, whole armies might have been encamped

and we could not have dreamed of their presence. My eye lingered on the castle, lying yonder in a hollow by the river with its guardian woods around it. How comforting were its red, kindly lights, twinkling a message of peace and of rest ! And somewhere beyond river and forest, league upon league to the east or the north, was the Swedish army. Through those woods must come the Swedish King to meet the Cardinal, who was already awaiting us in that haven amid the birches and the firs. *La Paix des Dames !* There was better than that in those twinkling lights. When we, too, crossed the river in the spring we could find the road to honour, to freedom, and to Polenstjerna.

The Princess had spoken truly. In another hour we were not only at the castle, but I was standing alone in the great hall. How strange it all was, and yet how familiar ! A wild confusion of welcome, a racket of countless servants, of men and women running to and fro, and here I was blinking at the roaring fire, surrounded by portraits and arms and tapestry and the spoils of the chase. Were it not for the weird Polish tongue and the weird Polish faces we might have been making a joyful return to Polenstjerna.

Two fingers were suddenly laid on my arm. "M. Martin," a crushed voice moaned, "the Cardinal is not here."

"Not here ?" I repeated, scarcely understanding. The agony in the Princess's weary face made me sick. And there swept across the hall that icy wind, the breath of an unseen and unknown world, which had pierced my marrow at the rendezvous.

"He started before we did," she said, slowly, "and ought to have been here at least twelve hours in advance of us. *Mon Dieu !* if the Cardinal should fail us !" She sank into a chair and stared helplessly at the roaring fire.

Pity and terror fought within me.

"Princess," I said quickly, "I will return to Warsaw at once, if you desire it."

Her slender form stiffened ; a flash lighted up her weary

eyes ; the radiance stole again into her cheeks. "No, no," she said, "we can still wait a little. I have sent out to inquire. We shall know the truth in the morning. But I thank you from my heart."

She moved away sadly. "Courage, Madam !" I cried. "His Eminence will come. We must, we shall, succeed."

She could not smile. "If his Eminence fails us," she said, clenching her hands, "we are undone."

We looked at each other in silence. "Do you trust the King ?" she asked, in a broken whisper.

What a question from the Princess Rapierska to me, the prisoner of the Königstein ! "Madam," I could only say, "we have put our trust in his Majesty the King of Poland. If—which God forbid !—he fails us, Grodno is yonder and we can put our trust in another king, the King of Sweden."

A hot flush spread over her pale face ; indignation quivered on her lip.

"You trust the King of Sweden ?" she asked.

"I have no reason to love the King of Sweden," I replied, "but I would trust his justice more than that of any man or king in the whole world. He fears God, Madam, and he keeps his word."

A fierce, proud reply stormed into her eyes. Then she suddenly put up her hand in passionate warning. "Not a word of this to Ebba, not a word, as you would serve her and me. It would kill her. This is our business, yours and mine, M. Martin, and *you*, I know, will not fail." And I was sent to my chamber with a smile that they would have found difficult to resist at Grodno.

When I had changed my clothes I flung the casement open and stared eagerly out. In the soft mist I could just trace the gardens sloping down to the river-bank fringed with trees ; I could hear the ice blocks grinding in the stream. Beyond, all was hidden in the woods, forbidding and impenetrable. And then as I stared I thought I heard, far away, ever so far away, a faint, muffled trumpet call, a mar-

tial note, barely wafted to my ears and no more. I listened, excited. No, I was dreaming. Would it had been a trumpet, the trumpet of the Swedes !

A blithe young voice began to sing, in the gallery :

*“ Och hör, Du liten Karin,
Sag vill Du blifva min ? ”*

I had not heard those words since I was at Polenstjerna, two years ago. I flung the door open.

“ *Herre Gud !* ” Greta exclaimed, “ how you startled me, M. Martin ! ”

The wench looked so fresh and young and fragrant of Sweden that I felt better at once.

“ The Fröken Grefvinna,” she said, “ is so cheerful that I needs must sing. She laughed as I dressed her, and she would wear her gayest robe. That was right, was it not, for you are taking us back to Polenstjerna ? ”

I stifled my sigh. We had been gay, the Princess and I; now we were sad. My Lady had been sad; now she was gay. It was indeed a mad world.

“ The Fröken Grefvinna is descended to the salon,” Greta prattled on. “ I have done my best, and she looks to-night as when you, sir, taught her——”

“ And when Axel kissed you under the linden tree by the statue near the fountain, eh, Greta ? ”

Greta blushing tossed her head, but she did not deny it. Doubtless both she and Axel remembered the box on the ears that my Lady gave them.

“ Do you know,” I asked slyly, “ that Axel is only twelve leagues away out there ? Perhaps he will take you back to Polenstjerna.”

“ Axel ! ” Greta tossed her head more saucily than ever. Since that summer day under the linden tree she had seen the great world, but, for the matter of that, so had Axel.

Her roguish jollity sent me tripping down the stairs,

happier than I had been for a long while ; and as I sought the salon the words of the song rang pleasantly behind me, the words of my Lady's favourite song :

*" Din rödaste gullkrona
Jag passar inte på ;
Gif dem din unga Drottning
Låt mig mit åran gå."*

The words had come true. My Lady, like little Karin, had refused the finest crown that a false King had offered her, asking only to be allowed to depart in honour.

Suddenly in the antechamber I tottered against the wall. An icy breath had smitten me, a breath from an unseen world, with the taint of the bones of dead men in its blast. Ah ! I knew it now. It came from the *Salle des Pas Perdus*, from King Eric's Tower. My God ! what was that ? I shrank on to my knees with a terrible shudder, covering my stricken eyes ; my hair quivered crisp under my wig.

A stifled cry, the cry of my Lady's voice in the horror of pain. But it was fully two minutes before I could master myself enough to advance. And then I failed twice. Could I — a miserable sinner — dare I venture in there — there — where — ? Again that stifled cry. With a tremendous effort I wrenched the curtain aside. Thank God ! my Lady was alone !

She stared at me. " You— ! " she said, faintly. She put out her hand for support, and I was barely in time to help her to a seat.

" It is nothing," she muttered, closing her eyes. " I felt ill ; it is nothing. I am better now."

She sat up and tried to laugh, looking slowly about her. Towards one corner of the room she would not look and I would not look either, no, not for a kingdom.

" You thought you saw someone ? " I asked, " a woman ? "

" Thought ? " she repeated, in a terrified bitterness
" Thought ! she—here—ah ! "

“ In God’s name, Grefvinna, was it—was it the White Countess ? ”

Her fingers tightened on the chair. “ Ah ! ” she murmured. “ Then—then you saw her, too ? ”

I was still trembling all over. Could I ever forget that sudden icy blast with the taint of dead men’s bones in its breath ? — my hair still quivered — I covered my face. I dared not look around lest I should see what I had seen.

“ The second time, the second time, ” whispered my Lady. “ And I came down so gay, so gay because Greta sang, as she dressed my hair, of ‘ *liten Karin*. ’ See, I put on my pink silk that Bengt brought me from Paris in honour of the Princess, and then—and—as I sat here— ” She, too, pressed her hands to her eyes. What we had seen was not for mortal speech to describe, a vision for its sublime and awful ghostliness not to be forgotten so long as life lasted.

The White Countess ! Remember that I had lived two years at Polenstjerna ; remember the story of the White Countess ; remember why my Lady had fled, and then judge us if you dare. No papers, no Cardinal — these I could endure. They were the work of human hands, of living flesh and blood, but the White Countess !

“ There is some disaster, something terrible hanging over Sweden, ” she murmured. “ It is not Bengt. My God ! if it were Bengt ! ” Her bosom heaved with a cruel sob. “ No, it is not Bengt ; it is Sweden and the King. The White Countess never appears to us when we Polenstjerna are concerned, only when the King, our King, is in danger. ”

The paleness and fear of the mortal woman for herself passed away, and in its place came fear, tragic fear, the fear that ennobles and purifies.

“ Yes, M. Martin, ” my Lady said, quite calmly, “ Sweden and her King are in some awful danger. And we, we are helpless here. ”

“ May God in His mercy guard the King ! ” I cried, and

the eyes of this true daughter of Sweden grew sublime with a silent prayer, a prayer for the King who had exiled her and me, but who was and always would be the King of her country, her race. "*Pro Deo ! Pro Fide ! et Pro Suecia !*" The words were on the locket that hung on her breast. We sat in silence in that awful Polish salon, and as on that night in the hall of Polenstjerna, the air was thick with presence of spirits not of this world. As we prayed in our hearts for Sweden and her King, out there beyond the trackless forests, both my Lady and I knew that we prayed in the presence of the mighty Polenstjernas, her ancestors, who had fought and still would fight, "For God, the Protestant Faith, and Sweden !"

Was this, *this* the answer to the question which I had thrust to one side, "You are marching towards Polenstjerna, but are you marching towards the truth ?"

"Hush !" said my Lady, "I hear the Princess coming. Not a word, not a syllable of this to her Highness."

The Princess swept in with such a proudly gay carriage that I, who knew her secrets, gazed in astonishment. Truly I knew as little of women as a frowsy hermit.

"Welcome, again, *ma mignonne*," she cried, as she kissed my Lady ; "you honour my castle indeed.—Is she not superb, Monsieur Tutor ?"

Ah, yes ! she was, for Greta's deft fingers had been defter than ever. Ah ! had God but made my Lady fair as other women were fair, Polenstjerna Castle had not been empty at this moment, nor those accursed papers in the possession of King Augustus the Strong.

"M. Martin knows nothing of silks and satins," replied my Lady quickly, "and cares less."

"You are wrong, *mon cœur*," the Princess answered. "M. Martin both knows and cares. He does not speak because he always keeps his most interesting thoughts to himself."

And we went in to supper, the sorriest supper that I have ever eaten. Twice the Princess raised her glass,—the toast

of "*La Paix des Dames*" was on her lips; twice she put the glass down untasted in silence. At every minute I feared to feel that icy blast with the taint of dead men's bones in its unearthly breath, to see again what had smitten me cowering to the floor; at every stir of the tapestry, at every faint footfall my Lady stiffened and half closed her eyes that she might not behold what her heart told her might be stealing behind her; at every clatter without the Princess started in her chair. Was that the sound of the coach wheels of his Eminence, or of the horses' hoofs of the King of Sweden? And I, who feared and expected both, must sit still, gnawed by unceasing care, knowing that each of these hapless women was hiding a cruel secret beneath the most pitiful of proud smiles.

"I am not fit for company," said my Lady at last, "I will retire." And the Princess and I sighed in exquisite relief. "Greta shall sing the fatigue out of me with a song. Do you remember, M. Martin, '*Konung Eric och Spåqvinnan*,' or '*Brunkeberg's Slag*'?"

Did I not? Had not my Lady taught them to me and sung them and many others on the Terrace at Polenstjerna when we should have been reading in books? I escorted her in stupid silence to the gallery where we found Greta still crooning happily to herself, and then I returned to the Princess, carefully avoiding the salon, for the air everywhere to night was heavy with the presence of men and women whom I prayed I might not see. There were Poles among them, I could feel, and God guard me from a vision of the ancestors of the Princess and my Lady!

The Princess was sitting resolute and vigorous at the table. The weariness and dejection were gone. Beautiful she was and always would be, but the woman before me was no lisping lady of the boudoir and the Court; it was a woman, alert, resourceful, meet to plot and plan, the Princess who had devised *La Paix des Dames*.

The time had come to speak frankly, and I told her all.

But the tale of the papers I was relieved to find hardly disturbed her mind.

"It is only his Excellency," she remarked, calmly ; "he means to hold this business of the plot in his hands to the end. Better he should have the papers than"—she paused, frowning,—“than Herr Patkul.”

"Patkul !" It was an odious thought. "And the Cardinal, Madam ?" I questioned hastily.

The Princess flung down the knife with which she was playing. "He may have thrown us over. He may offer your King of Sweden to depose his Majesty. The King of Sweden is just and fears God, but if the Cardinal has done that he will agree, and we shall have to fight till one or the other King is beaten."

"And your Highness,—what will your Highness do ?"

She seized the knife and drove it into the table. "I shall fight," she said, fiercely, "for his Majesty of Poland to the death."

I dared not ask as to my Lady's fate. No man could have asked that question with those eyes upon him.

"But can his Eminence dare," I did inquire, "to be such a traitor ?"

The Princess laughed. "His Eminence, who also fears God and pretends to be just, will do precisely what suits his interest, as I would do, or the King of Sweden."

I was becoming angry. "The King of Sweden will keep his word," I said, hotly, "and, Cardinal or no Cardinal, we can still make peace. Your Highness has the King's written authority to make peace ?"

"I had," she replied, dryly.

"Had ! Princess, had—?" The perspiration welled out on my forehead.

"The written authority is in the possession of his Eminence," she replied coolly ; "it was the only terms on which he would come. The King persuaded me against my will to give it him."

"God help us!" We stared blankly at one another.

"Supposing," I said, scarcely able to find the words, "supposing it is not the Cardinal who has failed us, but the King——"

"The King? What do you mean, M. Martin?" She confronted me haughtily.

"Yes," I repeated doggedly, "the King of Poland——"

"The——" and suddenly a horn rang out, answered first by one trumpet and then by another. Out there in the courtyard the clatter of many horses' hoofs and the clank of arms resounded fierce and martial.

"The King of Sweden!" I cried, excitedly. "He has kept his word."

"No, no," she contradicted, joyously, "that is a Polish trumpet. Thank God! it is the Cardinal at last. We are saved."

I sprang at the door; it opened in my face, and the steward flew past me, panting. A sharp dialogue in Polish followed.

I watched the Princess. She let her arms drop wearily and sat down.

"It is not the Cardinal," she muttered, brokenly. "It is the Graf von Waldschlösschen from Warsaw, and he has a hundred troopers with him."

"The Graf!" I cried, clutching at the tapestry. "The Graf!"

"Stay with me, M. Martin," she pleaded, earnestly, "I cannot see the Graf alone."

Her face grew hard, her body stiff and proud. A tramp of heavy boots in the corridor, a ring of spurs, and the next minute the Graf, muddy from head to foot, his mouth drawn, his eyes tired yet determined, was bowing in silence to the Princess Rapierska. Never had I seen her so much the princess as at that moment.

"Shut the door," was her haughty greeting, in the tone of one commanding a lackey.

The Graf paused, looked her full in the face, and then he turned to me. "You heard," he said, as haughtily as herself, "what the request of the Princess Rapierska is. Will you be good enough, M. Martin, to close the door?"

I closed it, and we three were alone.





CHAPTER IX

A PRINCESS OF POLAND

"I DESIRE to know," began the Princess, "what is the reason of the appearance of the Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen at this hour in my castle."

"I am here," replied the Graf, sweetly, "by the command of his Majesty the King of Poland. My instructions were that as the Countess Polenstjerna is at present under the roof of the Princess Rapirska, at the peril of my life I was to see that no harm came to that lady."

At this startling answer both the Princess and myself shrank back with good reason. The poor Princess pressed her hand to her bosom. Her thoughts were choking her.

"His Majesty," she faltered, "has discovered, then, that the Countess is here?"

"I presume so," said the Graf, with a bow of the most studied politeness. "My instructions are what I have said."

At one blow all our hopes were shattered. It was a *coup-de-grâce* worthy of the man who had flung me into the Königstein.

"So you, Herr Graf, are here as a spy?" the Princess said, with a superb courage.

The Graf swore, but to himself. "I gladly leave to your Highness," he answered, quietly, "to describe my office. Speaking for myself, I prefer to say that I am here to obey."

The Princess looked him up and down, then she walked slowly towards the door.

"I regret to inform your Highness," pursued the Graf, "that my orders are to guard this castle. I shall therefore be obliged to leave some of my troopers here."

"You will make your own arrangements," lisped the Princess over her shoulder. "But,"—she faced him with a magnificent gesture,—"as a Polish noble, whose rights the King dare not touch, I shall refuse to recognise his Majesty's *orders* to quarter his troopers in my castle. This castle is not the Königstein, nor is this country Saxony. I warn you, therefore, if blood is spilt it does not rest on my head. Your arm, M. Martin, I beg."

The Graf bowed. His mouth was twitching, but whether with a smile or with anger, I could not decide. "Your Highness," he said, coolly, "need be under no apprehensions. It is no part of my duty to quarter myself or my troopers in your castle. We shall form our camp at some distance. Before God, Madam," he added, quickly, "I, least of all men, desire to make this or any other castle a Königstein."

Her face softened at the amazing tenderness as well as passion in that sudden outburst.

"Adieu, Princess," he said, softly. "The gaoler will shortly be changed. In a very few days his Majesty will be here to spy for himself."

"What!" cried the Princess, "the King coming——"

"Yes, Madam. Inform his Majesty that I told you, and such revenge as you have not already taken on the Graf von Waldschlösschen will be yours. Adieu!"

He bowed, marched to the door, and put on his hat.

"Graf!" she cried, remorse in voice and eyes, "Graf!"

The next minute my Lady had swept past him into the room. She was wearing still the splendid pink silk, with a loose wimple of white fur thrown hastily over her head and bare shoulders, and her eyes were blazing with excitement.

"Cousin," she cried, "Bengt is here, Bengt is here!"

"Bengt!" exclaimed the Princess, the Graf, and myself in one breath.

"Yes," said a passionless voice, "Bengt is here, and not too late, it would seem. Princess and Cousin, I am your humble servant."

He was stooping unruffled over her trembling fingers before we had recovered from our astonishment. His cloak and boots were as muddy, his spurs as red, his face as tired and drawn as the Graf's, but the calm confidence in his bearing was as unconquerable as ever.

"The Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen," he said, with a freezing bow, "will be good enough to re-enter the room." Whereupon he closed the door. My Lady offered the Graf a frigid salute; the aversion in her bearing, as she sat down, almost mastered the happiness that Bengt's arrival had kindled. The Princess remained standing, looking now at the one, now at the other, in a dazed bewilderment. Feeling that this was no business of mine, I endeavoured to retire, but my Lady rose quickly. "No, my friend," she whispered, "you must stay." And, as if to help me, she signed to me to seat myself beside her.

Yet I hardly noticed her courtesy, for I could not take my eyes off Bengt and the Graf. It had come at last. The trial of strength so long averted would be fought out in our presence. What was I to do?

"The Herr Graf," Bengt commenced, "has doubtless explained his presence here. When I have explained mine we can proceed to business."

We listened in a stupefied silence while he briefly informed us how, after leaving Warsaw, he had suddenly been stopped on his way to Grodno. The King did not require him to proceed; his Majesty intended to work in another way. Fortune had then thrown him in the path of the Princess's courier, and he had not only learned of our plans, but of much else besides.

To all this the Graf alone listened with an ostentatious indifference.

"There is only one thing to be done," Bengt resumed,

with quiet firmness, "and that is that you, Ebba, must return to Warsaw. Peace is in grave danger, but we may yet be not too late."

"And why should Ebba return to Warsaw?" the Princess asked, harshly. Bengt knitted his brows; for all his coolness he was in no mood to brook opposition.

"Peace, her honour, and mine demand it," he replied, shortly.

My Lady leaned back with a catch in her breath.

"Ebba's honour, Bengt! I confess you surprise me."

"Ebba is a Polenstjerna, Cousin; her honour is as safe at Warsaw as at Stockholm. You forget I propose to accompany her."

The dignity of the answer was worthy of the look my Lady gave him.

"Believe me, Ebba," he said, earnestly, "peace now"—he paused on the word—"can only be made at Warsaw. Your honour, my honour, and the future of Sweden lie there. It is not too late to save both. You will come?"

The Graf took out a snuff-box, shook it slowly, watching them both almost with amused pity. My Lady rose, and the Princess at once took a step forward.

"That," she said, with tremendous energy, "is impossible."

"Impossible!" Bengt repeated, as if he had not heard aright. "Ebba, it is you who must decide. You will trust me and come?"

"Never!" said the Princess. The Graf took his pinch of snuff.

"Ah!" said Bengt, sharply. "I begin to understand. I see my charity was mistaken. This mad journey is not an imprudence. Ebba, I regret to have to warn you against those who would make you the tool of their intrigues."

"Bengt!" exclaimed the Princess, the word leaping from her lips as a sword from its sheath. The Graf hurriedly put the snuff-box in his pocket.

“Bengt,” my Lady protested, earnestly, “I beg you to be calm. I came here of my own free will.”

He smiled at her pityingly. “Your innocence, sweetheart,” he answered, “makes me proud, but you are mistaken. Listen. For months I have been working for you and for peace. I leave you in Warsaw with those whom I thought I could trust. A crisis arrives, and behind my back the labours of months are ruined at one stupid blow. We may yet be able to undo what this mad journey has enabled our enemies to accomplish. But you and I must be at Warsaw to do it. Your honour and mine demand it. I ask you in the name of our race and our country to come.”

My Lady stood torn with doubt.

“Let me tell you that not only can your honour be saved,” he urged, “at Warsaw and nowhere else, but the honour of our cousin here.”

“Pray, what does that mean?” asked the Princess, scornfully.

“I would save you from the consequences, Madam, of your folly,” he answered, sternly. “Your great plan has broken down miserably, as I could have told you it would, had you been wise enough to ask my advice. But you were blinded by——”

“Stop!” cried the Princess, angrily.

“No, I will not stop. We are not playing in a boudoir here; this is no time for honeyed speech and the sophisms with which men and women delude themselves. We are fighting for our honour and our lives. You *shall* listen! The Cardinal has been summoned to return, as I was; your precious document of powers to make peace has been cancelled; a message has been sent to the King of Sweden, my master, saying that the King of Poland will proceed in another way; my master will not come to Grodno now, still less to this castle; the King of Poland, your master, has been convinced that you, Madam, were about to betray him,—you and the Cardinal,—and unless he is persuaded that that

is a mistake you, my cousin, will go from this castle to the Königstein——”

“Ah !” cried the Princess. “It is a lie, a lie——”

“We shall see,” said Bengt, grimly. “Are the troopers of the Graf von Waldschlösschen a lie? I tell you that if you wait here, though you are a Polish noble, you will be condemned by the Polish nobles as a traitress and you will go to the Königstein.”

My Lady was staring blankly in front of her. “Ruin,” I heard her sob, softly, “ruin, as always, to all my friends.”

The Princess had sunk into a chair, crushed and hopeless.

“Come, Ebba,” Bengt said, not untouched, “we may yet undo this work, if we are speedy.”

My Lady looked up. Her face was magnificently calm. “Do not ask me,” she said slowly. “I have left Warsaw for ever. I will trust myself to God, but never again to the King of Poland.”

The Graf took out his snuff-box and began to play with it. His horrible indifference hurt me sorely.

“Very good,” Bengt said at last. “So be it. That is good-bye to peace and the restoration of your good fame. I accept it. Let it be war, war till we have hurled this King of lies and lust from his throne. We will not go to Warsaw, we will go to Grodno, and thence to my master, your king and mine.”

A happy flush crimsoned my Lady’s face. Truly my Lord Bengt played on her heart, her Swedish woman’s heart, as a master on his organ. Then the flush died away.

“No,” she said, sorrowfully, “we cannot go.”

Bengt was too astounded to protest. He passed his hand over his sleepless, determined eyes.

“It is impossible,” my Lady said, with a great effort, “not because I fear the King of Sweden. I will take whatever he awards me. But you, Bengt, are a prisoner. You cannot, you shall not break your word for my sake. You must return to Warsaw.”

“And you, Ebba?” he asked, stonily.

“My duty is to help the cousin who risked all to help me. It is I who have brought ruin upon her. I should be a worthless woman were I to abandon her now. I will not.”

“Think, I beseech you. Your honour——”

“My honour is your honour, Bengt. I will not go to Warsaw, no, not to be Queen of Sweden. And I cannot leave my cousin. God in His wisdom alone can show whether I am to remain Fröken Polenstjerna all my life.”

Bengt was as a man paralysed.

“Listen, sweetheart,” she said, tenderly, and for her, as for us, the room had only those two in it. “You and I can trust one another. Go back to Warsaw; believe me, all will be well if only we keep our hearts pure and do our duty.”

“It is impossible,” answered Bengt, hoarsely. “I cannot, will not, leave you here.”

“No, no!” my Lady pleaded, “my honour is past saving now. I am innocent and you know it; that is enough. But your honour is untouched. God forbid that I should be the cause of your soiling it——”

It was terrible. Alas! my Lady did not know that she who loved him was bidding him go to meet dishonour at the hands of his enemies and hers. This, too, was the fruit of a man's ambition; and such is the manner in which God justifies His ways to men.

She laid her hand on his arm and led him softly towards the door. Did she know that if he went he would probably never see her again, her, the woman for whom he had sacrificed all? I had been in the Königstein, but what was that punishment to this?

They had paused in dead silence on the threshold. The Graf quietly took a step forward. “It is a pity,” he said very distinctly, “that the Herr Graf von Polenstjerna has so much regard for the honour of others and so little regard for his own.”

In the solemn sorrow of parting my Lady did not hear.

But a fierce flash leaped into Bengt's eye. My breath stopped. God ! the time had come. What was I to do ?

"Before the Herr Graf leaves," pursued that cold voice, "I must beg a few minutes' conversation."

My Lady recoiled. "Impertinent traitor" was what her face called him. Then she turned to Bengt. "Adieu !" she whispered, and gave him her hand.

"Graf," I said, distraught, "as a friend I ask you to keep your words to the King's business."

"That, M. Martin, I propose to do."

"Princess,—" I began, desperately.

"No," said the Graf, with an icy determination, "no; what I have to say must be said in the presence of these ladies."

The Princess had risen. "Not here, not now, for my Lady's sake !" was the cry in her face. She, a woman, could not have a woman's heart broken in her presence.

Bengt drew himself up. He waved the Princess back. "Ebba," he said, haughtily, "I beg you to remain. Well, sir ?"

"The last time," commenced the Graf, measuring his words, "the last time that you and I, Herr Graf, conversed was in King Eric's Tower."

A quiver ran through my Lady. Bengt stood unmoved.

"Since then you have done me two foul wrongs. My friend, your cousin, Count Karl, you did to death ; myself you had flung into the Königstein."

"Bengt," implored my Lady, after an awful pause, "have you nothing to say ?"

"Yes," replied Bengt, "I have. To the broken adventurer who duped my cousin, to the traitor who cozened my unhappy aunt, and to the liar who now insults me I have only one answer. When," with a superb bow, "the Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen desires that answer I am at his service."

The Graf laughed. "No doubt," he replied, bowing,

"no doubt. But before I go the way of Count Karl Polenstjerna I desire the Countess Polenstjerna to know the truth."

It was pitiful to see my Lady blench. For the first time an awful suspicion of that truth smote her and she bent like a willow to the storm.

"For God's sake, Graf," I implored, "stop!"

"No," he replied, his eyes flaming, "I will not stop. This is no time for honeyed speech. We are fighting for our lives and our honour. And I say this, that it was Count Bengt Polenstjerna and I who in King Eric's Tower planned treason against the King of Sweden in the cause of the King of lies and lust, the King of Poland. For that Count Karl was done to death, and I was flung into the Königstein, and you, you alone, Bengt Polenstjerna, would go scot-free, but you shall not, you shall not!"

"Ebba," Bengt said, calmly, "why pursue this matter further? My master has investigated this charge. He is satisfied, and so am I."

The storm of suspicion had spent itself. My Lady faced the room in all the strength of her innocence and her love.

"And I, Herr Graf, am satisfied, too," she said, coldly. "You have brought a foul accusation against my cousin. You must abide by the consequences."

She curtsied low. Triumph shot into Bengt's face, and I breathed again.

"Shall we leave it then," asked the Graf, imperturbably, "until the King of Poland visits this castle? Will the Graf von Polenstjerna wait here to ask his Majesty whether he is satisfied, too?"

"His Majesty," said Bengt, with a great scorn, "can doubtless produce papers if he desires, papers such as made the Countess Polenstjerna lose her castle. We Swedes do not trust his Majesty as you, Herr Graf, seem disposed to do."

"You stopped my mouth for two years," said the Graf,

"but it is opened again. You, Madam, know the handwriting of your cousin. Will you do me the favour to read this letter?"

Out from the Graf's cloak came a sheet of paper. I knew it at once. It was one of the papers which Kätchen had stolen.

"Ah!" Bengt exclaimed. He had recognised it, too.

"Pray read it, Ebba," he said, coolly. "I will tell the company what it contains. I wrote it at Polenstjerna, when I discovered the treachery of this gentleman here. I intended that he should get his deserts, and I was successful. That letter, apparently, sent a plotter to the Königstein. I do not think," he added, smiling, "that you will find that the Countess Polenstjerna regards that as a very horrible thing to have done."

The Graf was for the moment quite nonplussed. Bengt's extraordinary quickness and resource had almost turned the tables. My Lady had begun to read the letter, but at Bengt's explanation she allowed it to drop on the floor. She accepted his word without question. I picked the letter up and studied it carefully. Bengt had at least told the truth to myself. My name did not occur in it. It was not he who had had me flung into the Königstein. And moreover the letter was so carefully worded that it would have been impossible to have proved anything against the writer save a somewhat too zealous desire on the part of the informant to have a miscreant punished. To anyone who knew the whole story the phrases and what lay behind them were damning. But by itself the letter proved nothing—nothing.

But the Graf was not at the end of his resources.

"You admit," he said to Bengt, "that you wrote that letter? I take it that you will also admit having written this one, too?"

And out came the second of the two papers that I had seen Kätchen steal.

"Forger!" hissed Bengt between his teeth. The blood buzzed in my head.

The Graf handed this, too, to my Lady. She took it carelessly, began to read with disdain, and stopped with a sharp, choking cry. The paper fluttered down from her trembling fingers; she tottered to a seat. In a trice the Graf had his foot on the document, just in time to save it from Bengt's tiger clutch.

"No," he said, and his hand was on his sword-hilt, "no, that is not your property. Be good enough, M. Martin, to pick it up and keep it till the Countess Polenstjerna desires to read it again."

I took it to my Lady, huddled up in her chair. What else could I have done?

"For the present I have nothing more to say," the Graf broke in, grimly. "I have no doubt the Princess Rapierska, who knows, and M. Martin, who is not a broken adventurer, will tell the truth if required. *Mesdames*, I am your obedient servant. And when you, sir, dare to return to Warsaw, I am at your service."

He bowed solemnly to each of us in turn and marched out.

Dead silence in the room. No one moved. The truth had come at last, and in vain I prayed to be guided as to what I should do now. When at last I could bring myself to look at Bengt he, too, was praying, I am sure. Subterfuges would avail him no longer. He was fighting now, not for himself, but to keep the love of the woman whom he loved.

My Lady rose from her chair, the letter in her hand. "Bengt," she said, in an anguish that made her voice fierce as I had never heard it before, "this, this is in your handwriting."

"It is a forgery," he replied, but there was none of that magnificent quickness and confidence with which he had for the moment confounded the Graf; "it is a forgery."

The Princess and I were watching him. At the sound of his cousin's voice he had recovered himself and his dignity was as impressive as it had ever been.

But to my ears it was the answer of a lost man. It must be lie now on the top of lie.

Something of what was in my mind had also, I saw, swept across the mind of my Lady. Involuntarily at his reply she appealed to myself. Shall I ever forget that look? It was the appeal of a heart that might break at any moment, seeking comfort and finding none. I felt myself shrink. I prayed she might not ask me to say what I knew.

She advanced slowly towards him. When she spoke, the tenderness and pride in her face and voice were beyond all words to describe. "Bengt," she said, quietly, very quietly, "I love you and you love me. I have never told you a falsehood, and I never will. You, sweetheart, have never concealed the truth from me. Give me your hand——"

She took his reluctant hand and looked into his eyes. "You will tell me,—me, Ebba,—" she said, "on your honour as a Polenstjerna, and speaking as a man to the woman whom he loves and who loves him, is this letter a forgery?"

For all the exquisite tenderness, there was in the awful question the sublime justice which alone can make human love divine.

Bengt paused. He made no craven effort to escape her gaze. He was trying to read what his love and hers demanded. "Yes"—and there was still hope; "no"—and she would tear the love from her heart and he be damned for ever. Could he, dare he, tell the truth? Could he avow himself a liar? The Devil said, "yes," his manhood said, "no." He looked at her fixedly. Nothing of fear in that look, only the pain and travail of an immortal soul.

"It is a forgery," he said, between his teeth.

The Princess fell back with a sob of relief.

The Devil had conquered; but not even the Devil, who had given him my Lady's love, could make him say, "On my honour as a Polenstjerna."

My Lady, still holding his hand, kissed him softly on the

forehead. "I believe you, sweetheart," she whispered. "Forgive my asking you. You must return to Warsaw and do your duty. God will protect you and me till we meet again. Good-bye."

And now that the agony was past, he could endure her presence and her pure eyes of loving confidence no longer.

He left the room.

My Lady stood gazing at the closed door. Then she suddenly tore the letter into a hundred pieces, and flung them passionately on the fire. "Thank God!" I heard her sob, as she sank into her chair in a storm of pent-up tears.

Comfort neither the Princess nor I could offer her; speak we dared not, for we knew the truth. So there she sat, weeping her happy tears of a woman's joy and a woman's remorse, a woman who had doubted and was glad that she had doubted for the comfort she had won. And we, we who knew, must sit silent now, and until God, whose eyes are upon the truth, in His infinite wisdom should dispose otherwise.

Presently she rose, pale, proud, triumphant. "Good night, Cousin; good night, my friend," she said, gently, as if she would ask pardon for what she had done, and I was alone with a woman whose heart was truly broken, a ruined woman, happier only than my Lady in that she knew the truth, that worse ruin could not come than was already here.

The Princess, with her hands clasped against her knees, was staring wearily at the knife which still quivered in the table where she had driven it in, ah! so many hours and days ago, it seemed.

"There are swift horses in the stables. They are still mine; some of my people will go with you," she whispered, eagerly; "you—you—M. Martin—can fly; you must."

"Why should I fly? and for what? After to-night there is nothing—nothing." I seized that wretched letter which Bengt so proudly avowed having written; the cursed thing was lying at my feet, mocking me. I hurled it into the fire. Why, oh! why had he not told the truth?

The Princess gripped my arm and looked into my eyes. "Was the Graf lying," she questioned, almost beside herself, "about the King?"

"No, no, Madam," I said; "I am only too sure of it."

She flung my arm away. "It is that Muscovite hound," she said, "he and no one else. Why did I not kill him? Jesus! that men can be such curs and liars, that women can make them into such curs and liars, kings and boors alike! Our womanhood, our sex, is a curse. We are the devil, M. Martin, the devil who tempts and betrays; and God, the God of the priests and the Church, permits us women to tempt and betray, and then punishes us, punishes us, the women."

Her passion scorched me like fire. I quailed before her.

She clenched her hands. I feared she would strike me. "I may be outcast," she burst out, almost with a sob, "I may be reviled, but I will not be beaten. I have done with the King of Poland. Yes, I have done with the King of Poland. I renounce my allegiance," and she tore from her neck and bosom the chain and locket that nestled there and cast them to the ground. As it fell the locket opened; it contained the portrait of the King of lies and lust. In a moment she had stamped on it, and ground that face to powder.

Ha! it had come at last. We thought we were marching towards Polenstjerna. We were, and now we were marching towards the truth, too, and first of all, towards the truth.

"I loved that man, the King!" she cried. "I worked for him night and day, I sacrificed my honour for him because I loved him; I sacrificed for him what no man knows; I was his creature, his slave, in soul and body, proud to be his slave; and he would treat me as if I were a trull of the streets, to be bought and sold for gold; but he shall not do it, by God! he shall not."

I threw up my hat. I could have cheered till I was hoarse. We were marching towards the truth.

"The Königstein !" she laughed; " the Königstein ! I, a Polish noble, to the Königstein ! We will see, we will see."

" Yes, Madam, we will."

" Ah! he shall learn; that Muscovite cur shall learn; the King and his wantons shall learn. From to-night I cease to be his subject. I renounce my allegiance. Let his troopers come here and they shall go back to him in blood. Let his Majesty come himself, and he will discover what a Polish woman can answer to a perjured Saxon Elector."

She snatched up her hand-bell and rang it, kept ringing it till the men-servants came flocking in, and she spoke to them in their tongue as she had spoken to me. Their sallow faces flamed with unhallowed fire at her words, their swords flew out, and they left her presence with battle and no quarter in their eyes and fierce oaths on their lips. The trumpets blew their challenge into the night; out there they were closing the gates and hoisting the drawbridge.

" When his Majesty comes," the Princess said, as the welcome sounds, the hurrying to and fro of armed men, filled the room, " I will fly the Swedish flag in his false face, and it shall not be hauled down so long as there is a woman here to command."

" Nor so long, Madam," I replied, joyously, " as there is a man to obey your Highness's orders."

" To-morrow, M. Martin," she pursued, " you shall find the Graf von Waldschlösschen——"

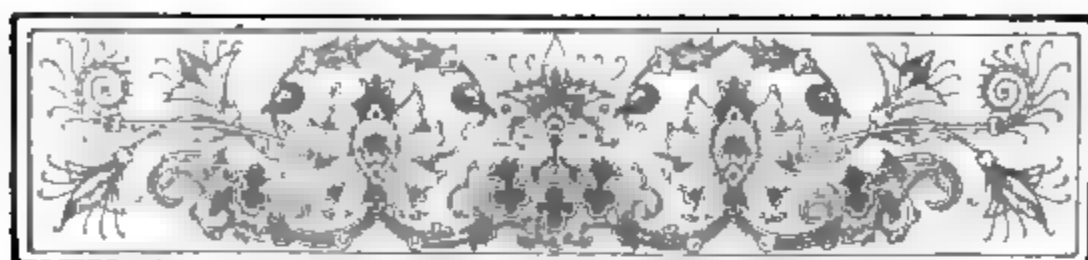
" The Graf—" I stammered.

" Yes, the Graf. They would stop the King of Sweden. They shall not. The Graf, aye, the Graf, shall bring King Charles here, as he promised. I know the truth, as his Majesty of Poland will discover, and the King of Sweden shall know it, too. We will save ourselves, by God ! we will !"

She swept from the room. A trumpet sounded hoarse and defiant. They were setting the guard. My heart was

beating as fiercely as those drums in the courtyard. To-morrow we would march towards Polenstjerna. To-morrow we would march towards the truth, and the truth would prevail. We would save ourselves. By the living God! we would!





CHAPTER X

THE LAGER BY THE RIVER

TO find the Graf! To find the Graf! All night long I hunted the Graf through trackless forests bleached by winter's breath, across poisonous marshes where the ice was green and slimy, over endless plains strewn with dead men's bones; I was pursuer and pursued, haunted and hunted by the unceasing clang of arms, unearthly trumpets proclaiming that we were ruined unless we found the Graf. And there was no Graf, only mocking Kätchen, who changed into Patkul, with eyes triumphant with Riga and immortal revenge.

A gentle, persistent knocking roused me. It was Greta in the chill dawn of the grey corridor. "From the Herr Graf," she said, simply.

I tore the letter open and read as follows :

"*Mon Cœur* : I must see you to-day and at once. The messenger who bears you this will bring you to me. As you love me, do not tell the Princess or Mademoiselle your mistress, but come. I kiss your hands until we meet."

I grabbed at cloak and sword, and Greta led me swiftly by backstairs to a tiny courtyard, where in the dusk of the morning two horses waited, and on one sat a Polish trooper. Without a word I sprang into the empty saddle.

Greta had fetched a cup of wine. "To Polenstjerna and Sweden!" I cried, and a sob shook Greta's breast.

"Come back, sir," she said, "the Fröken Grefvinna has only you now. Come back."

She kissed my numbed fingers and stood watching us wistfully until the closing postern and the curling vapour snatched the trim figure from my view.

“*Adjö so länge!*” I cried, for I was in lousy spirits.

My silent guide headed straight for the vast belt of forest which shut us in to the north. In that mighty waste of wood the snow was still crisp and dry, and we were able to break into a smart trot. A dozen strides and we were buried in its depths. Heavens! what a forest it was! You must travel to Poland to learn what it is to be swallowed up in trees, trees, nothing but trees, bleached, gnarled, bare, desolate, hideous, dense. No sound but the monotonous fall of the hoofs and the measured panting of the horses, and the sharp, continuous snap of twigs, waking in the desert mysterious echoes which reverberated through an eternity of silence, and then were rolled back on us from far and unknown shores. The infinite loneliness, the infinite vastness, the infinite littleness, of man's life were hidden in these unending vistas. And as the grey spirits of the woodland enveloped me in their vaporous clutches and breathed their icy breath into my marrow, I felt that I had been torn from the world of living men and women, and was being slowly devoured, not by a forest which had in the travail of the ages grown up on God's and man's earth, but by the forest of my feverish dreams, in which, through the night, in a sweating agony I had hunted and been hunted. I dared not look about me, lest in the horrible witchcraft of this labyrinth of skinny arms, the bloodless gnomes of the bare trees should suddenly twist themselves into the mocking confidence, the immortal hate, of Patkul. Ha! the branches already wreathed their brown fingers into jeers, and were spun into fantastic flouts. “Lost! Lost!” They snapped and hissed. “Last night, poor fool, you thought you were marching towards the truth; to-day in this forest of falsehood you will slowly be choked, choked. And it is we, the Spirits of Evil who lived beneath King

Eric's Tower, we, the children of the Father of Lies, who will choke you."

My guide pressed on remorselessly, crouching cunningly over his horse's neck, never hesitating, never stopping, and I followed, crouching, too, and munching as best I could to breed some courage within me. Presently my fears froze; I was numbed; the utter stillness, the stifling half-gloom, squeezed my mind dry of terror. I began to notice objects, then to reflect on our route. The Graf and his troopers had passed this way not so many hours before. The snow trampled by a hundred horses was the first sign that we were still in the real world. It became stupid. I cursed the wood, I cursed it heartily. Jog, jog, jog,—would we never be clear of these dull trees? Jog, jog, jog,—an hour had crawled away; jog, jog, jog,—another hour had been ridden through, and the silly trees were as thick as ever. I longed to put my head on my horse's neck and sleep; only fear of being left alone kept me from dropping out of the saddle.

"Hst!" My guide had drawn rein. "Hst!" he was peering into the maze of trunks in front of him. Forward there, a few hundred yards, was the top of the slope, an undulating barrier of stunted brushwood and dwarfed tree-stems. What a curious and amazing thing! From afar, through the trees pierced a dull, faint continuous booming, an unearthly muffled booming, made up, as it were, of all sorts of sounds, none of them distinct, like the ceaseless moaning of the sea heard at night, inland, far from the shore. I jumped. An infernal crashing and plunging—a pause—a shrill whistle. Two horsemen had appeared and halted; and now through the brushwood I could see flickering gleams of fire. My guide made a peremptory gesture for me to ride on. Then he calmly trotted away in the direction of the castle, and was devoured in the jaws of the forest. I moved forward. A challenge rang out. My heart leaped up. One of the two mounted men was the Graf himself.

His was the face of a man who has endured a sleepless night in the saddle, a face into which the raw, grey chills have soaked. This was a Graf I had never seen before, a soldier, authoritative, quick-witted, almost brutal, not the scheming, gay courtier of the salon whom I had grown to love and respect.

"Yes, my friend," was his strange greeting, in Swedish, "dirty work awaits us. Are you ready for dirty work?"

"I am ready to obey," I answered.

"A better answer than you usually give," he replied. "Did you think you would see that, my prince of students?" he demanded, with a diabolical chuckle, as he drew up sharply.

"Good God!" I believe I exclaimed.

The trees had ceased as if by magic. In front of us the plain slid imperceptibly down into a vast open space, and then rose as imperceptibly till the ground was suddenly imprisoned by a solid girdle of wood, such as I had just escaped from. Right opposite, the forests on the north and behind us on the south stretched horrible crawling arms towards one another till they met and linked the west in another black, impenetrable girdle. Forests then encircled this huge amphitheatre on every side save one, where to our right and the east the bare plain fell away, sucked up by the marshes, over which floated a thin mist, and the marshes were the banks of the river, stealing from the labyrinthine woods, winding for a mile in the open, and then lost again in the woods. Beyond that green serpent of icy water the banks ascended, clear at first, gradually dotted with trees and brushwood thicker and thicker at every yard till they were swallowed by the vast forest which might, for all the eye could see, reach to Grodno, Moscow, or the end of the world. Well might I catch my breath and stare. The amphitheatre before my astonished bookworm's sight was alive, swarming with men, horses, arms, waggon, carts, even some coaches and calèches; it was a great camp, the camp, it seemed, of an

army as numerous as the army of Xerxes. I rubbed my eyes, dazed by the blinding smoke and glare of countless camp-fires, of figures moving in all directions, "with dreadful faces throng and fiery arms," as our own poet has said, the poet to whom has been revealed, even as to the Florentine of old, the unseen terrors of hell. As in a nightmare, dim human shapes, distinct yet in an inextricable medley, torture and bewilder the sight, so now there surged into my eyes—I saw, rather than heard—an inferno of living things and sounds, laughs and oaths, commands and counter-commands, neighs and groans, creakings of wheels, trumpet notes, and the dull throb of drums, a chaos of sound inspired by a palsied restlessness.

I stared. Gradually the scene became quieter. Strange, the men and horses had not become calm. The confused movement was still there, the confused din filled the air. I was simply able to distinguish one man from another, a horse from a pony, a waggon from a coach, an oath from a laugh, a command from a neigh, a bugle from a drum.

"A neatly chosen spot," the Graf remarked. "My master, Prince Eugène, could not have chosen a better. Study it, my bookworm; it is a lesson for you. Do you mark those two roads emerging from the wood on the west? That is the way to Warsaw, and we hold them both in force. Our flanks, you will observe, are covered by the forest. Attacking a camp through woods is like playing blind man's buff with a swarm of bees—the bees are bound to have the best of it. And our front faces the river, where lies the only decent ford for ten or twenty miles either way. It's the devil of a ford, too, thirty yards wide at the most, with twenty feet of water on either hand and a half-frozen morass on either bank. Our guns—you can see 'em down there—command the passage. God help the men who would force that ford! So soon as they show their snouts beyond the trees they will be carrion for the Jews and the wenches to play with. *Allmächtiger Gott!* it is a good position.

And," he added, licking his lips, "it is on the way to Grodno."

He pointed out the entrenchments thrown up hastily on the rim of the flanking forests, on which men were now working, the outposts on the other side of the river, whose mounted pickets were silhouetted against the gnarled branches of the trees, the blocks of ice floating and grinding down the stream, the slimy marsh that began where the river ended. The woods concealed their appalling secret only too well. The camp did not spring into view until you were in its very jaws, to become carrion for the Jews and wenches to play with. God indeed help the men who came this way from Grodno!

"And what—" I began.

"Ah! there I cannot answer you. Do you suppose," he said, with a slow wink, "that I would have brought you hither merely to romp with and woo the she-devils of loose-skirts and draggle-tails you will find in our camp? They are not the cut of petticoat that is good for you and me,—too much sauce and too little nourishment for queasy stomachs like yours and mine."

I laughed; it was too comical and too pitiful. That I, Hugh Martin, who had once taught my Lady on the Terrace at Polenstjerna, who had once read Plato and Mr. Locke, should have come to this—a bestial, roystering, seething camp, ready to make carrion for Jews and wenches!

"How many have you here?" I asked.

"Oh! I fancy about eight or nine thousand, perhaps ten,—the men I mean,—and quite enough."

"What? Only ten thousand—"

He laughed. "You thought we had eighty thousand at least. When you have served a campaign or two you will see that three hundred look to the greenhorn like three thousand. That is why the raw recruit in his first fight wishes he were back in the pothouse with Moll on his knee. But take my advice and have something to eat first; you

won't like what you see. It is not a student's cell or my Lady's parlour."

I could see that already, for just under my nose the camp began. Round a small fire not fifty yards away were drawn up a couple of waggons to which the horses of a squadron were tethered. Poles had been planted, with rough cloth stretched to fill the gap and keep off the wind, and scattered round the fire were twoscore of troopers, brawny, coarse, dirty, red-faced men, eating, drinking, sleeping, chattering, singing, mostly on the ground, but some three or four happy in the possession of a flock of filthy straw. For some minutes I had been conscious that two women, beside whom Kätchen in her most unseemly humours would have appeared modest, were flitting to and fro, shrill-voiced and tawdry. In the centre of the group sat the sergeant, cross-legged on a sack, a huge flagon beside him from which he drank as he plucked a fowl lying on his knees. And as he plucked and drank, he bawled out a song:

*"Der Papst lebt herrlich in der Welt
Es fehlt ihm nie ein Ablassgeld.
Dafür Ich möchte denn der Papst wohl seyn,
Ich möchte doch der Papst wohl seyn.
Doch nie! Er ist ein armer Wicht,
Ein hübsches Mädchen küsst ihn nicht;
Er schläft in seinem Bett' allein,
Ich möchte doch der Papst nicht seyn."*

Every fourth line, when the singer paused to drink, was rapturously taken up and thundered out by the troops with oaths of their own, even by the girl who was kneeling in front of the fire stirring a great kettle, by the wheezy Jew and his hag of a mate, peeling onions behind the wheels of the waggon. But I had other things to do than to dally with hussies of a Polish lager.

"What made you do what you did last night?" I asked, boldly, as we found shelter behind a half-finished entrenchment.

The Graf's face darkened. "That is my business," he answered, shortly.

"You might at least have told me before leaving me alone in the inn——"

"It was not till I left you that I received my orders, and I had time only to send you a message. I have done all for the best."

"It is for the best, I suppose," I said bitterly, "that my Lady's heart should be broken for no good that I can see."

"Tush!" he said, impatiently. "Is my Lady to live for ever in a fool's paradise? No. *Allmächtiger Gott!* no. We have had enough of that. It is time we should have a little truth. Break her heart, my bookworm!—pure fiddlesticks! The truth never broke an honest woman's heart and it never will. I tell you, I have done all for the best. I promised to help Mademoiselle, but in my own way. You will be wiser before the day is out." A strange softness moistened his eyes that the camp had made so brutal. When the corners of the Graf's mouth twisted down like that, the rack would not have lured his secret from him. I must wait.

He was staring at the troopers and the fire, but I am sure he did not see them.

"We will do it," he muttered, "we must, and then—" he smiled at me, and the softness in his eyes was now a hopeless yearning.

The sergeant had ceased to sing. In his place our Hebe of the draggled skirts and the tawdry bodice had perched herself on a waggon wheel and was shrilling out between mouthfuls of hot soup, her own military madrigal:

*"Ein Kuss von schönen Mägdelein,
Ein frisches Lied und klarer wein,
Die drei sind Noth zum Leben!"
Ja Leben!"*

"Ja Leben!" roared the troopers in the lusty waggishness that hot soup and beer will breed.

“The baggage is right,” cried the Graf. “Wenches, songs, and the wine—what would a soldier’s life be without ’em? what would a bookworm do without ’em? You will see what I mean when I have shown you the camp.”

He took my arm and led me away. Yet there was not so much to see, after all. I had seen one camp-fire; the rest were mere copies, more or less, some more squalid, some more shameless. At every turn we passed such groups as I had thankfully just left; now it was Poles in fur cloaks and sabres, bespattered as fantastically as the troopers of the Princess with the wings and feathers of wild birds, and looking in the glare of the flames a thousand times more ferocious and bloodthirsty; now it was ragged Saxon infantry with pike and musket, their hungry, tattered air proclaiming that the revenues of Augustus the Strong had not been squandered on them; now it was troopers such as the Graf commanded. At first I peered as a child at the booths in a fair, but I soon grew tired with the dreary iteration of dirty straw, of waggons, of the swearing, rabbling men, and of the wantons of women, coarse, brazen, shrill-voiced, giggling. The ceaseless din and ceaseless movement, the rasping words, the foul odours, made me sick; and there were so many other things, such as I dare not set down here and I would gladly forget.

“Nice cattle, are they not?” inquired the Graf; “devils to plunder and ravish, but I have my doubts as to how they will fight.”

“But where do all the women come from?”

“God knows. They are always with us. Your Saxon won’t fight, or thinks he won’t fight, without ’em, nor, indeed, will any soldier with whom I have ever served. The hussies! I’d have the whole brood flogged every week at the drumhead to keep them in a sweet temper. Keep clear of ’em. They can be civil enough so long as you have a stiver or a whip; they will sell you vodka for nothing but the love of your pretty brown eyes, and stick a knife between

your ribs in the gloaming that there may be one more lump of carrion as naked as Adam himself to chuck into the river in the morning. Keep clear of 'em, I say, until you have learned how to deal with 'em, and that takes time."

"Is it like this in the Swedish camp?" I asked, sadly.

"Good Lord!" he burst out laughing. "If all they say is true, King Charles would as soon tolerate a spy as one of those draggle-tails in his quarters. You saw that hussy rub her shoulders. I take it they had been warmed for her by the Swedish Provost Marshal. Oh, we do it sometimes here, too, when the men are getting sulky or dull. Shall we visit the officers' quarters?"

I shook my head vehemently. If I were King Charles I should have begun with the whip at the officers' huts, for I was not born with the scruples of the quality.

A splendid young Pole in a gorgeous leopard-skin had come up to us. While the Graf and he talked I watched a group drilling, a group of the Saxon Guard. They were as little like the soldiers of my fancy as the Swedes I had seen two years ago at Carlsberg. The bravery and frippery that was so imposing when flaunted in the corridors of the *maitresse régnante* wore a very sorry appearance after a week of the camp, and I was wondering whether those wonderful Life Guards, the glory of Whitehall, who had entranced my childish eyes, looked as these men did when they were in the field.

The Graf had grasped my arm. "Our reconnoitring party is coming back," he murmured. "Shall we go and have a peep at them as they ride in?" His voice was quiet enough, but his eyes blazed with excitement. The notes of a trumpet rolled over to us from the woods opposite. Ha! mounted men were straggling from the woodland and moving slowly toward the ford.

The camp was agog. The Graf and I ran with the others, and halted on the edge of the marshy ground along with a motley crowd of soldiers, officers, and women, all pointing, staring, chattering incoherently. The Graf had

found a splendid coign of vantage ; and what I saw was a straggling line of troopers, careless, defiant, triumphant, jauntily plunging into the stream. The ford did not admit of more than two or three abreast, and even then the water swirled around the girths and eddied about their spurs. One here, another there, was roughly bandaged and the bandages were bloody ; some could barely sit up in the saddle. One man swayed heavily and dropped, and in a trice the current had swept him out of sight. Their beasts were muddy and tired, pacing wearily with drooping heads. These men had been fighting, but against whom ?

I gripped the Graf's arm. Behind the troopers rode in single file a line of men, thirty, maybe, certainly not more, their legs tightly fastened beneath the horses' bellies, and beside each rode a Saxon soldier. Prisoners ! and wounded prisoners, for to a man they were bandaged, some in half a dozen places, and they sat their weary ponies as wearily as a rider could. I scanned them with beating heart. These were men in faded, torn blue coats, with ragged sheepskin cloaks, their faces pale, stricken with pain, bloody. But their glance was still defiant. I brushed my eyes roughly ; the air had suddenly become misty. The oaths, the exclamations, the questions of the crowd about me I hardly heard ; the pushing I did not feel. I was dimly conscious that a trooper at my elbow had hoisted a woman on his shoulder, that a woman's arm reeking of onions and vodka rested on my arm. I had seen those men in the faded blue coats and ragged sheepskins before. Where ? Where ?

"They are Swedes," said the Graf, hoarsely.

"Swedes !" God ! he was right. Of course they were Swedes.

"Our men rubbed up against them this morning out yonder," he murmured. "There were ninety or so then ; that's all that's left of 'em. What devils they are to fight ! They cut up an odd hundred of our fellows before they were done for. We were five to one, but——"

"Swedes!" I could only repeat, faintly. "What are Swedes doing——"

"It may be only a foraging party got astray or,"—he paused, adding in a low voice, "or it is true that the King of Sweden has evacuated Grodno and is moving in this direction. Can you recognise 'em?"

I shook my head.

"They say they belong to the Life Guards. If so," he could hardly whisper for his excitement, "King Charles is out there, too, somewhere." I stared. Yes, they were Swedes. There was no mistaking their fair complexions and hair and blue eyes; and such fine, gallant fellows, too. The horses were splashing out of the river and scrambling under oath and spur up the slippery bank. A woman in the crowd shook her fist at them, and cursed the prisoners to their faces. The Saxon troopers who rode beside them looked so strangely jaunty, and some had already stopped to drink what eager hands in the throng were holding out. But what was that in the rear of the troop, a string of what looked like pack-horses, yet saddled?

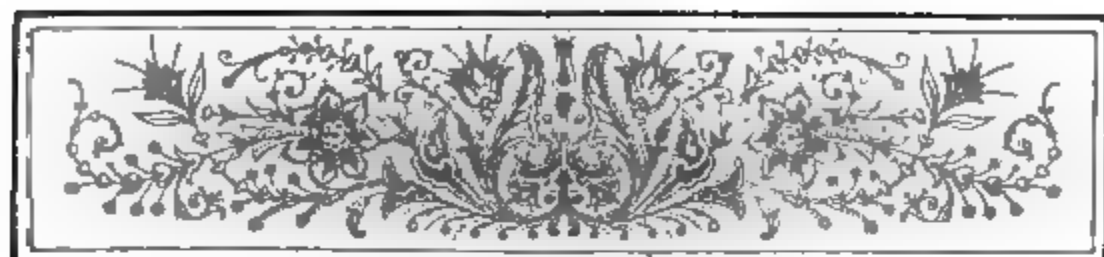
The saddles were empty, but strapped across the horses' backs, this way and that, were two, three, four——

"Hallo!" cried the Graf, "hallo, my friend, what 's the matter?"

I tried to rub away the sickly mist that clogged my vision.

"*Potztausend!*" muttered the Graf. "Have you never seen dead men before? It 's only the dead they are bringing in for Christian burial. A camp is not a convent, my bookworm."

He dragged my wretched carcase away. Ugh! He let me get away, where I could not see that horrible string of horses with arms and legs carelessly roped across them, and hanging down stiff and stark. I had had enough of this damnable lager by the river. "Water," I muttered, "water," and then I swooned away.



CHAPTER XI

THE TRUTH THAT LIES IN VODKA

WHEN I opened my eyes I was sitting on a drum beside a fire, and all around me was a strong smell of cooking. "Drink this," a voice whispered; "it will not do you any harm."

"Kätchen!" I exclaimed. There was a dull roar of laughter.

"Yes, Kätchen, at your service," said the voice, saucily, and there was another salvo of dull guffaws.

I was not dreaming. It *was* Kätchen, curtsying mockingly, glass in hand. Kätchen in a roguish fur cap, a short fur jacket, and a blue skirt that reached but a few inches below her knees. Round her waist was a red silk sash with gold tassels, and she was booted like a trooper.

"To our newest recruit!" she cried, gaily, and the knot of officers round the fire roared their approval.

"M. Martin," the Graf remarked, coolly, from an empty tub, "comes from his Majesty with an express, and his stomach is——"

"Our healths!" Kätchen shouted, and as they drank she placed a booted foot on my drumhead and handed me a glass, whispering hastily, "For God's sake! sir, look to the Graf and do as you are told."

I kissed her dirty fingers humbly. "Your healths, gentlemen!" I cried with a brave swagger, and the officers bowed politely.

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“Our salon is here,” she added, pointing to the cabin behind the drum. “Will your Excellency be pleased to enter?”

She pirouetted in front of me, spreading out her short skirt saucily. I was alone with her at last, in an evil hole of a room lighted by one tiny window out of which the glass had been knocked. A few boards on tubs served as a table, and more tubs as chairs. Kätchen stuck her hands jauntily on her hips and peered at me.

“There is no time to talk,” she remarked hastily. “You must bustle, my friend, for we have company to-day.”

“But, Kätchen——”

She put her finger on her lips. “No chattering here while I am in command. You must know that I am in charge of the liquors for the officers of the Saxon cavalry; why, God knows, and if I knew, I would not tell you. The table-cloth is behind you; put it on while I fetch the dinner, and be quick.”

She whisked out of the room, leaving me to struggle with the dirty table-cloth, the broken tumblers, and the still dirtier knives.

“Bravo!” she cried, as she staggered in with a steaming cauldron. “Famous! you are neater even than my girls. What a pity you are not a woman, what a pity! I could make you do such lots of things that a clumsy man can’t do,” whereat she thrust her tongue into her cheek.

I could have slapped and shaken her; I very nearly did. But for all that, I helped her to tie her apron over her red bodice so bravely slashed with gold, Kätchen submitting meekly in mock silence.

“You are burning to tweak my nose,” she remarked, coolly, putting one corner of the apron in her mouth. “You can if you like, and on my honour as a woman, I won’t even scream.”

“If you were not Kätchen,” I said, severely, “I would——”

"'Pon my soul I believe you would. But there ! we will forget it. I thank you," and she curtsied. "And forgive me," she pleaded; "I'm just mad with excitement, and my blood is in such a racket that I could stand on my head, if you would allow me. Will you promise, M. Martin, to be wicked, really wicked, if I tell you a great secret ?"

I looked at her, beginning to feel dizzy again.

"Oh! I would n't peach; I can keep as well as tell a secret." She pursed up her lips and stole on tiptoe up to me. "The Herr Major-General Patkul dines with us to-day," she whispered.

"What ?"

"It's gospel truth. That Livonian *gentleman* dines with us to-day. For God's sake! be wicked once and you'll not regret it."

I seized her hand.

"Tell me what I have to do and I will do it," I said between my teeth.

Kätchen stood thinking, fiddling all the while with the corners of her apron.

"*He* is coming," she answered, slowly, breaking off with an exclamation as the Graf pranced in, his arm around the waist of the wench whom they called Anna. "*Chante, chante, ma belle mignonne, chante toujours,*" he hummed gaily.

A tall form, stooping, darkened the threshold.

Kätchen flew to the door. "Welcome, welcome, Herr General !" she cried, curtseying till the hem of her skirt swept the dirty floor.

The great man deigned to raise her up and to pat her red hair. "And who is this ?" he asked, with a sour frown at poor trembling me.

"M. Martin," glided on that marvellous Graf, "is known to your Excellency ; I add that he has but two enemies in the world, Bengt Polenstjerna and the King of Sweden."

A flash leaped into Patkul's eyes. He regarded me with the deepest interest.

"He desires revenge on those two enemies and nothing else," the Graf pursued. "Meanwhile he has put his sword at his Majesty's service and is acting as my spy at the castle that your Excellency knows something about. M. Martin can hold his tongue and tell the truth better than any man I have ever met."

Patkul surveyed me almost in a friendly way.

"Some day, when the time comes," the Graf continued, unabashed, "M. Martin will ask your Excellency to help him to gain the revenge that he seeks."

"The gentleman," Patkul answered, slowly, with a smile that seemed to rise from the lowest depths of his mind, "the gentleman may not be so far from his wishes as perhaps he thinks."

A flutter flashed through the Graf's eye, and I felt a sly dig in my back from Kätchen.

The Graf and Anna bustled about, serving the great man. Kätchen was cooing to him softly in German. Presently she slipped from the room, and on a sign I slipped after her.

"For heaven's sake," she urged, with a frightened vehemence, "humour him. He is in command here, and could clap us all into irons if the whim seized him. We shall want you in an hour or so, and then you must play as you never played before."

She pushed me into a small room opposite to the one where the Livonian traitor was already beginning to swill, and disappeared. Ugh! what a nasty, noisome, dark hole of a room it was, smelling of everything vile and unclean. But anything was better than roaming about that roaring porch to hell outside, at the mercy of officers, troopers, Jews, and women. My dream had come true. I had crossed the trackless woods; I had pursued the Graf, and he had changed into Patkul,—Patkul, confident, remorseless, with immortal hate and immortal revenge in his eyes that spoke of Riga.

The Herr Major-General was enjoying himself in the

cabin opposite. Kätchen's and Anna's voices echoed ceaselessly; the Graf was singing wild snatches of song. Oaths and heartless laughter, eager exclamations, the clink of glasses, the fumes of wine and vodka, the savour of viands, the clapping of hands, the stamping of feet, choked the poisoned, frosty air. The only person I did not hear was the great guest himself who had us all at his mercy. From time to time I stole out to breathe some fresh air, and stood on the threshold gazing at the misty dusk swiftly wrapping the swarming camp in the pall of night. The countless fires glowed red and hot as the smoke of the furnaces of the bottomless pit; the encircling woods grew blacker and blacker; yonder over the river flickered a dim lantern where the outposts were set, scarcely piercing the dank vapour that hung over the slimy marshes whose jaws were hungry for the men who would dare to ride this, the only way from Grodno to Warsaw. Aye! all round me they were eating and drinking, swearing and laughing, singing, and quarrelling just as those with their general were doing at my elbow. Occasionally a drum throbbed restlessly, a trumpet called; but for that you would have said that the plain was given over to roystering revelry, careless of the morrow. And away beyond the inky, trackless woods waited my Princess and my Lady whom I had deserted; away out there ran the road to Warsaw held in force, Warsaw, whither my Lord Bengt was riding to ruin, Warsaw where the King of lust and lies, having bilked the Cardinal, was surely roystering and revelling too; and away out there beyond the lanterns and the outposts was Grodno, where perhaps the King of Sweden lay. Did he know that we, we ten thousand strong, barred his march, that all the bridges were broken, that the ford was commanded by guns, ready, at the command of the man who was due to the Swedish executioner, to make him and his men carrion for the Jews and the jades whom he had flogged from his quarters? Peace! was it to make peace that this camp had been pitched? The truth! Were we,

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the Graf and I, marching towards the truth, marching through the forest of lies? No! we would be consumed in the iniquity of those about us, because we, too, had sinned.

The night had fallen on us. But up there above the feeble lanterns of wicked men God, whose eyes are upon the truth, had lighted His eternal lanterns, and through the steamy vapour pierced the calm stars in the frosty air—calm stars gazing down on us here as in the childhood of the world they had gazed on the Cities of the Plain. To how many men and women since have they not looked down on the darkness of the earth with a message of warning and of hope that no principality or power can quench?

A hand was laid on my shoulder. It was Anna, her cheeks flushed, her apron awry, her hair tousled. "Kätchen," she said with a thick laugh, "says you are to come."

I followed her in silence.

The room was lighted with two flaring tallow-dips. Patkul sat at one end of the rickety table staring stolidly in front of him, listening to the low whispers of Kätchen, and chuckling and cooing softly from time to time. At the other end was the Graf, a cracked tumbler in his hand which he waved to the measure of the ungodly jumble of songs, French, Polish, and German, that oozed from his wheezy throat. Pouf! he was drunk, noisily drunk. The odour of vodka, burnt wine, and of half-cooked victuals now cold filled the room. Pools of vodka and wine lay on the table and dribbled down the sides of the tubs.

I cannot set down here what passed, nor does it matter; we drank and revelled and sang till I forgot who and where I was. How I became sober again I do not know; but a mighty slap from Kätchen shook me from my stupor.

Patkul was sitting opposite to me, snorting with triumph. "They wanted the King of Sweden," he was growling, "wanted him in the castle of the wanton Rapierska. By God! they shall have him, and to-morrow."

"Yes, Excellenz," I replied, meekly, "to-morrow. I believe you."

"And where will Bengt Polenstjerna be? Where? He will be with the Cardinal and the wanton herself, under lock and key. Ha! M. Martin, you shall have revenge, I promise you. We have papers, the King and I, and we shall show them to the King of Sweden, and Bengt Polenstjerna will be ruined as I was ruined. They will cut his head off, for he is a traitor,—a traitor, do you hear?"

"Yes, Excellenz."

"And the proofs, where are the proofs? Oh, ho!" he dug me savagely in the ribs. "Oh, ho!" he laughed, and his bloodshot eyes were full of sullen suspicion.

Giant though he was, I very nearly throttled him then and there. But not yet—no, not yet. When I had squeezed his secrets out of him, I laughed, then I would wring his neck for a lying, treacherous cur.

I kicked the Graf, who was snoring loudly. "Hurrah!" I howled, "hurrah!" I threw up my hat. "Wake up, Graf! to-night the bottle, to-morrow revenge,—revenge, do you hear?"

The Graf lifted his head. "To-morrow," he groaned, "you silly jack-pudding, you will be sober. Revenge! you cockatrice, let me sleep. Go on," he whispered, "go on, for God's sake! I'm dead drunk."

Patkul emptied his tumbler over him. "The Graf is a fool," he said; "I have tricked him as I tricked Bengt Polenstjerna. I discovered the plot of the wanton Rapirska, I, the 'Muscovite hound', the 'Livonian swine'; call me a 'Livonian swine', and I'll—no, we are all friends here, eh? I have fooled them all. Ha, ha! They asked the King of Sweden to come, they sent the Cardinal to meet him, and she, the wanton, slipped away: she would make peace behind my back; we will see. And now they think it is all over. But it is n't over, it is n't." He leaned forward and his voice dropped. "The King is coming; he is riding to meet

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the Cardinal to make peace. I have asked him,—I, the 'Livonian swine', in the name of the Cardinal, and he will come. He keeps his word, the King of Sweden. Ha, ha! the Cardinal is the bait, and I have baited him, the King of Sweden."

"Hurrah!" I shouted, for the Graf had swung over and gripped my foot.

"We have captured some of his men; they are here, damned dogs of Swedes! I will wring their necks, and to-morrow the King of Sweden will be a prisoner, my prisoner."

I fell off my tub in the horror of it. We were lost—lost! The King of Sweden was coming, riding into the jaws of death and of hell, and the Graf and I were drunk at the mercy of this Livonian traitor.

"You would have revenge?" Patkul whispered, his eyes blazing; "then come with us to-night. The King of Sweden is encamped at Menckwycz; he has only six hundred men; I have an appointment with the King of Sweden, ha, ha! and to-night I keep it. We shall storm his camp, and we shall take him prisoner, and then there will be peace, the peace of Patkul, eh?"

He sent me staggering back with a giant's thrust, and I crouched against the wall in terror. He looked so hideous and huge. And we were all lost—lost. "King Charles—Menckwycz—to-morrow at dawn"—I kept repeating to myself. We were all lost.

"I am the Cardinal," he growled, like a beast over its bloody prey, "I am the Cardinal. The King will meet me, the Cardinal, and there will be peace. He shall make peace, and I'll sit on his damned neck while he makes it. His father, curse him! called me a liar and a traitor, and his son shall take my hand, the hand of honest Reinhold Patkul. He shall take me back, by God! he shall! We shall see. To-morrow—" he snatched up the bottle and when he found it was empty, he hurled it across the room. "I'll break him and Bengt Polenstjerna; I will scatter the bones of his father

who made me a traitor, and when the real King comes, the King of Poland, Ebba, the adorable Ebba, shall rule the Court, and she shall go down on her proud knees and give me a kiss because I made peace."

Just in time Kätchen pushed me away, or I should have wrung his neck as he sat there murmuring my Lady's name.

"Drink, my prince," Kätchen whispered soothingly.

"Give me my sword," he cried, "give me my sword. I am going to storm the King's camp, and take him prisoner."

We gave him, instead, more to drink, and he drank greedily.

"What 's the hour?" he asked, suddenly.

"Five o'clock," Kätchen answered at once. Perhaps she was right. It did not matter; we were all lost.

"Plenty of time," he muttered, "plenty of time. We start at four, and will catch 'em at dawn when men sleep heaviest. Let me sleep too—I will sleep!" he shouted.

He lay down with his head in Kätchen's lap, but only for a minute. "Quick, Martin!" he called; "go and see that the guards are set; not a man is to leave the camp. There shall be no treachery, and the password is—the devil!" he giggled, "I had nearly told you. No one knows it but the King and I and the King's guard. We are shut in, till the King of Sweden is a prisoner."

He flopped down, and lay breathing heavily. Kätchen made a sign. He growled, and swore, and fought, but somehow Kätchen, Anna, and I got him out of the room and laid him down in the noisome cabin opposite.

"Anna," Kätchen said, "stay with the pig, and if you let him out of your sight I'll flog you myself round the camp-fire as the Graf had that trull flogged yesterday." And she dragged me out of the kennel.

Once her supporting arm was taken away I flopped down too. Would those cursed bottles never stop dancing? "The King of Sweden—Menckywycz—four o'clock—" I

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kept repeating to myself, as if those words burning red and white behind my aching eyes were likely to go away.

“Bravo!” Kätchen cried. “Bravo! we should never have done it without you. *Herr Jesus!* you kept your word, you were damnably wicked, but I won’t peach——”

“Kätchen,” I said, “I am glad he only kissed you once.” I could think of nothing else to say, and I must say something.

“Pooh! I would have given him fifty to make him blab. What are my kisses worth? What are any woman’s kisses worth?”

“Nothing, nothing. Nothing is worth nothing now.” I rested my throbbing head on the table and sobbed.

Kätchen shook me, causing my head to shoot with pain. “Pfui!” she cried. “Fie! why, you are drunk, too, like the rest of ’em. Oh! for shame! For shame! M. Martin.”

“Leave me alone, I want to sleep——”

“I won’t let you alone.” She whispered in my ear.

I reeled to my feet. Confound the dancing bottles and the flickering lights! My Lady! where was I? “Four o’clock—Menckywycz—King Charles.”

It was n’t time yet. I could still sleep till ruin came to us all. My Lady was miles away; she must please herself, for she was sober and I was drunk. Drunk! not a bit of it; I was only sleepy, sleepy, and lost—lost. I would sleep. I must sleep. Ugh! a shiver ran down my back, another shiver, why, confound it! I was dripping wet. Kätchen was splashing icy water on my face.

“Put your pate in there,” she said, “or I’ll put it in for you,” and I was swung upon my knees and was over my ears in half-frozen water.

“Now for the Graf,” I heard her say, and when I dragged myself away from the tub the bottles had ceased to dance, the lights were dim and steady, and in front of me was the Graf, swearing, laughing, splashing as I was splashing and choking.

"You're a pretty pair," Kätchen said, shaking her fists at us, "a pretty pair to make a man blab and leave it to a woman to make you sober. Fie! M. Martin, you of all men! If Mademoiselle could only see you!"

I dried my face on the vodka-stained table-cloth, staring stupidly at Kätchen, who had dropped upon the floor with a sob. "*Ach! Gott!*" she moaned, twining her fingers in her tousled hair, "it is all over, and I am drunk, too, drunk." She began to join in the wheezy ribaldries with which the Graf was filling the room.

King Charles, with only six hundred men, was at Menckwycz, wherever that might be; at dawn he would be a prisoner. What did it matter when we were all ruined? This was the truth to which we had marched, the truth that lay in vodka.

I seized Kätchen in a sudden frenzy and shook her. She was in a swoon, rather than drunk, poor wench. The Graf, astride of his tub, laughed, as he sang, at my despairing efforts. In a wild, mad fury I dashed water over her head and shoulders.

"Kätchen," I shouted, in her ear, "good night, I am going! Good night, Graf."

"Going?" demanded the Graf, "going whither?"

"To the castle to save the Princess and Mademoiselle."

"You can't get out," said Kätchen, from the floor. "Oh, you fool!" she cried, "we are in a trap. No one can leave the camp without the password, and we have n't got it. Perhaps," she seized my hand, "you heard the password. Did he whisper it, that 'Livonian swine'? I can't remember." She strove to recall the past, flinging her damp hair out of her eyes.

"No. If he did, I can't remember it either."

"Then we are done," she muttered, glaring round, "done! The King's guard set the watch, and there will be no treachery to-night. We are done, done, I tell you."

"We are done," sang the Graf, with the liveliest gusto.

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"I'll have that password from him," I answered, savagely, "or I'll put my dagger into his traitor's throat. My Lady's life is at stake and——"

"The Princess!" cried Kätchen, "I had forgotten. The Princess!" She sank back shuddering.

But the Graf had sprung to his feet. "By heaven! the boy's right," he said; "go with him, wench, go with him. Kiss, cuddle that beast, and if he won't or can't speak, slit his throat from ear to ear. We must save the Princess."

Kätchen twisted up her vodka-sodden hair. She picked up a long, dirty knife. "Come," she whispered, "come."

We found him in that kennel, lying as we had left him. For two minutes we stared and the tallow of the dip dripped upon his fine coat.

"Give me the knife," I said, hoarsely.

"Excellenz," Kätchen whispered, shaking him, "they are setting the guard. What is the password?"

But he only grunted like a pig in the slaughter-house.

He should have one more chance, and I shook him, giant though he was, as a dog shakes a rat.

"Who's that?" he murmured, "who's that. Curse you! let me be." But I shook him again and again. He sat up. Kätchen supported his head. "Is it time?" he asked.

"The captain of the guard," Kätchen whispered, "he has come for the password,—quick!"

"Curse you! let me be; it's not time yet." His head dropped.

"The password," whispered Kätchen; "quick, and then you can sleep."

"The King's password, not mine," he giggled. His head dropped. "Ebba Polenstjerna," faltered from his hot lips, "a good password."

The dirty knife clattered on the floor. Kätchen was sobbing.

Outside the Graf awaited us, his face as white as paper, and a naked sword in his trembling hand.

"Fetch the horse," Kätchen panted out, and dropped in a swoon at my feet.

"*Allmächtiger Gott!*" sobbed the Graf; he was still half-tipsy. "We've bilked him. I swore we would, and we've done it. Look after the wench," he shouted, "look after Kätchen, she's a wanton, too; they say so, perhaps it's true; but you and I will save the wantons, you and I." He staggered out into the darkness waving his hat.

I carried Kätchen into the room and poured vodka down her throat.

"What's the hour?" she asked feebly.

"Not yet seven."

"*Gott sey Dank!* There's time; you can save them. Get them away, anywhere, anywhere, you promise?"

"Yes, yes, I promise."

The Graf strode into the room. Into the noisome air of the cabin smote a trumpet-call and the beat of drums. Down there they were setting the guard.

• We three went out into the frosty darkness and the pure light of the calm stars.

"You will succeed," Kätchen said; "nothing can stop you, M. Martin, for God is on your side."

Yes, God was on my side, God, whose eyes are on the truth.

"Kätchen did it all," said the Graf, as he helped me into the saddle. "Kätchen wormed it out of that 'Livonian swine,' when no one in Warsaw knew. We came, Kätchen and I, to save Mademoiselle and the Princess and you, and we've done it. We've bilked him and the King. And it was for you she did it, for you."

"Go," said Kätchen, "oh! go, before it is too late."

"God will bless you," I cried, sobbing, "I cannot, Kätchen." I took her hand and raised it to my lips. There were tears in her eyes as there were in mine; only the tears

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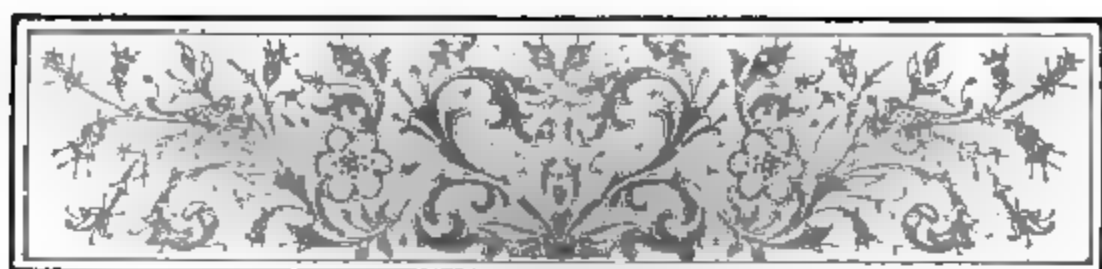
of a sinful man and a sinful woman, but such tears as by the grace of a just and merciful God may wipe out the stains of sin and keep a man's and a woman's soul pure.

" Good-bye ! "

" Good-bye ! "

And with my Lady's name on my lips to guard my path, triumphant and free I rode away through the camp and past the sentinels, out into the wood and the night.





CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET FORD

THE horse found his own way through the wood, and he galloped as if he knew that life and death were running a race against time. It was as much as I could do to keep in the saddle; for the bitter night air had brought back that hellish vodka into my brain, and the rush of the galloping hoofs kept it there. "King Charles—Menckywycz—four o'clock"—I heard and said nothing else.

I was first conscious of myself plunging along the gallery which led to my Lady's room and to my own. They had all gone to bed, the castellan said, and I laughed in his face. Pouf! how dark it was! and my legs trembled, and my back ached as if it had been knouted.

Which was Greta's chamber? This surely. I knocked with the thunder of one who would wake the dead, and I followed the knock by tumbling against the door. And then a laugh spluttered in my throat. Before me was not Greta, but my Lady herself, in a white mob and her golden hair about her shoulders. Her feet were bare in her slippers, and she had a dancing candle in her hand.

"M. Martin!" she cried, indignantly, "what are you doing——"

"I thought it was Greta," I faltered. Bah! how thick my voice was! "But it is better still——"

I leaned against the wall. Curse those horses' hoofs in my

head ! Curse the nightmare of trees and boughs swirling in the golden mist of her hair.

"Are you ill?" she asked. Then she recoiled with horror. "*Mon Dieu!*" she shuddered, "you have been drinking. Go, sir, go this instant."

"Yes," I laughed, with that spluttering laugh, "yes I, we, all of us, have been drinking." I reeled against the door.

"Go!" she repeated, so fiercely that I had to clutch at the wall to keep standing. I put my hand to my face. Faugh! it was bloody. That was one of the branches, or was it that Cossack outpost who had struck at me with his whip because I would not stop?

"Listen!" I gasped out; "the King is out there—Menckywycz—they start at four o'clock—dawn——"

The passage rocked up round me, the candle lurched in a halo of red-gold hair. God! could I not tell her before I dropped?

Through the mist I felt the terror leap into her eyes.

"Give me some water—a chair," I panted. "Dead beat, Countess—drunk—the Graf, too, and Patkul, some water, water——"

The candle dropped. In the dark two cool hands gripped my burning fingers.

"Are you hurt?" my Lady asked so tenderly that I sobbed. "Greta," she called, fiercely, "Greta!"

Greta came bounding in, and let her candle fall with a scream. "Peace, you little fool!" said my Lady, cuffing her "water! quick, water!" She pushed the wench from the room.

At last I was sitting down, and a yard of the hem of her mob was mopping my bloody face. A clock chimed out nine somewhere; I counted the throbbing strokes—nine—no more. Thank God! there was still time.

My Lady was kneeling beside my chair. "Tell me,—she implored, softly,—"tell me what I must do."

I tried to rise, but she gently pushed me down into the chair.

"Let Greta fetch the Princess," I said, "at once. Countess, go and dress. Every minute is worth gold. Leave me, I beseech you. I am all right now."

She went very reluctantly. How pure and tender she looked, and I had come from the camp and Patkul! I drank some more water. The galloping hoofs had ceased, and I staggered up to the mirror. Bah! I laughed and sobbed. Before me was a scoundrel of a man, splattered with snow and mud, hatless and wigless, his clothes torn, stained, reeking of vodka; a gash in his forehead had made his cheeks all bloody, and his eyes were mad with drink and pain and fear. And this was my Lady's cabinet! And out there somewhere was Menckywycz, and the King of Sweden to be attacked at dawn. I counted the hours, seven, eight, at the most. Oh! why did they not come?

After an eternity of torture they did come, my Lady, the Princess, and Greta, and not a word would they let me say till they, the Princess and my Lady, had ripped off my boots, bound up my head, and fed me with food and wine. And then to those two wretched ladies and a waiting-woman, who did not understand, I laid bare the truth that lay in vodka.

The Princess sat with her hands folded listlessly in her lap.

"Was I not right?" she said, helplessly. "The Livonian, that Muscovite traitor,—it is he and no one else. We are ruined, ruined! We cannot fly."

"Why not?" I asked, fiercely.

"Fly!" mocked the Princess. "To Warsaw, and the Königstein? They hold the roads, you say so yourself. To Grodno,—to fall into the hands of Patkul? Never! never!"

"Yes, it is impossible," repeated my Lady, doggedly. "Let us remain here. Better the mercy of God than the mercy of Patkul."

The Princess rose. "Let them come!" she said, defiantly. "Aye, let them all come! We will hold out; you and I, Ebba, will hold out. They can make peace over your body and mine, not before, and by that time all Poland will be in a flame."

"We will hold out," said my Lady, "till death, and it will be welcome."

"But you, my friend—" the Princess addressed me softly.

"I stay with your Highness and the Fröken Countess," I was proud to say, "till the end."

I took their hands. Poor suffering souls! they were grateful even for that wretched comfort. They should see that an Englishman, yeoman born, could hold out and die not less cheerfully and nobly than a Polish princess and the daughter of a Swedish noble.

"Greta," began my Lady, calmly.

I looked at the girl carelessly. Her eyes suddenly dilated, her body grew rigid.

"*Herre Jesus!*" She flung out her arms as if to avert something. "*Herre Jesus! Ah!*" She had fainted.

"You little fool, what ails you now—" My Lady stopped. An icy wind with the taint of dead men's bones in its blast had swept across the room; the candles flickered; they all went out but one.

"Holy Mother of God!" the Princess wailed, as she crossed herself on her knees.

Ah, ah! It was there again—passing—passing slowly—very slowly. It was gone. We were alone,—Greta in a white heap on the floor, the Princess crouching with her hands over her face.

"My cousin," said my Lady quietly, "have courage. God has reminded us of our duty."

My fear was gone. I picked Greta from the floor and carried her away. When I returned, the stern resolve in my Lady's face was also a stern resolve in my heart. "There is

still time," I cried, "time if I start at once ; Menckywycz is but three leagues hence ; quick ! let me have a fresh horse——"

" You, M. Martin ! " exclaimed my Lady. " It is not you who are going, you who are wounded and worn out ! No, this is my duty——"

I took my Lady's hands in mine, and I looked into her eyes, so brave and tender, and glowing with the divine splendour of an heroic enterprise. " Madam," I said, quietly, " if I were not here, it would be your duty, and God would guard you. But God, who has put this thought into your mind, has also given you another duty to perform, and that is to stay with her Highness and to work for Sweden within these walls. You will permit me to do your bidding. It is the least that I can do to show that I am grateful to you and yours."

For two minutes my Lady wrestled with her pride. " It is hard," she said, in a low voice, " hard to be a woman and so helpless. But you shall have what you ask. Go, my friend, and——" she dropped my hands with a sob. " Yes, it is hard to be a woman when you have the spirit of a man and there is a man's work to be done that you, a woman, have inspired. But the men to whom work is given to be done, yes, the men know to whom the honour belongs. And the land which has not mothers, wives, and daughters to teach their sons and husbands and brothers their duty will not have the men when the duty calls for men."

" What is it you would do ? " asked the Princess, fretfully.

I let my Lady speak. " We cannot save ourselves," she said, " but we can save the King. We had forgotten that M. Martin rides to-night to Menckywycz to warn and save the King, our King of Sweden. M. Martin," she added, with a glorious smile, " M. Martin to-night is a Polenstjerna, to-night and for the future." She gave me back her hands with the proud affection that is a brother's right.

For one instant the Princess stood perplexed, confounded.

"By God!" she exclaimed suddenly, with a superb passion, "you are right. We will bilk them yet. They have pitched their camp, and broken the bridges; they hold the roads and the passage of the river, but they do not know of the Secret Ford. No one but myself knows of it. It has done my house good service in the past; it shall save us and your King to-night. By midnight M. Martin will be at Menckwyecz and see the King strike his camp. At dawn he will be half-way to Grodno, and—and—when the King comes back with his army he will find the Countess Polenstjerna and the Princess Rapierska here to receive him, and the Swedish flag up there—" she pointed at the roof. "Ha!" she cried, "he who wins laughs last, and there may yet be *Une Paix des Dames*."

She swept from the room leaving me all aflame, too.

In ten minutes we three were trudging over the snow.

The Princess, lantern in hand, struck into a little wood which grew thicker and thicker till we had almost to crawl on hands and knees. The Polish horse, however, pushed his way through with a patient skill that shamed my desperate clumsiness. As if by magic the wood ended in a tiny clearing.

"Yonder is the ford," whispered the Princess. "Not three other souls in Poland could have brought you hither."

It was a grisly spot. The moon had risen, but the racing grey clouds veiled and unveiled it so rapidly that its light only served to make the ghostly darkness and the wooded silence more ghostly and grisly. We stood in the shelter of a sullen fringe of stunted trees, on every hand copses and forest so thick around this tiny clearing that I doubt whether anyone entombed in their depths could have guessed that here the ground was open. At our feet, and opposite, the banks sheered down so sharply that for man or horse to ascend or descend must have been thought a pure impossibility, and between them, fifty yards wide at the least, swirled the river, the blocks of ice turning their spectral

green faces to the watery stars. Yonder lowered at us wood even denser, and it was somewhere behind those impenetrable wintry trees that King Charles lay, coming to meet the Cardinal ; the King who, I now remembered for the first time, had said he would have my life if I presented myself in his presence a second time.

This—this was the Secret Ford !

“ You cross just here,” the Princess whispered, pointing to a tiny track leading to the water’s jaws. “ Sit tight in the saddle and go quite straight. There are only three feet of water in the ford. On the other side you will hit a tangled path, which will bring you direct to Menckywycz. You cannot miss it. The ford looks fouler than it really is. I have ridden over it on a worse night than this.”

She gave me her hand without another word and I kissed it in silence, though I heard the dry sob in her throat as she turned away.

I was alone with my mistress.

“ You are not afraid ? ” she asked.

“ No,” I could answer with perfect truth. “ No, I am not afraid.”

“ Let me come too,” she pleaded.

I shook my head sadly. The sight of that dear face was something that I could not just at that moment endure, and the night and its task lay before me.

There was silence. I must go, else I should take her to my arms, though I had given my word of honour.

Her hand lay in mine ; mine was shaking, hers was icy cold.

“ One question,” — she began, slowly, — “ one question before you go. My friend, did Patkul — that man — say anything of—of Bengt ? ”

I could not answer. Would you, in that place and at that time, having given your word to her and to him, have answered ? No, not if you were an honourable man.

“ You heard Bengt’s reply last night,” she said. “ I

dared not ask you then. I was too happy, I was too afraid. But you, who know the truth—you are going on a service whence you may never return. As you will answer one day before God, tell me, the wretched woman, Ebba Polenstjerna, is he guilty ? ”

I could not say, “ Yes,” nor yet could I ride into the night, maybe to death, with a lie on my lips,—a lie to her, the woman whom I loved.

“ Look me in the eyes, my friend; you cannot speak false. Is he guilty ? ”

“ You have no right to ask me,” I implored; “ take it back, Countess, take it back, I beseech you ! ”

“ I will not, I cannot. It is killing me. Ah ! God ! ” her voice broke. “ I cannot bear it, the second of my race guilty, guilty——”

“ What Bengt has done,” I burst in, “ he has done. It is all past now. But this I swear: Had I been in his place I would have done the same. He has done it all for you, for your sake——”

“ Oh ! silence, silence ! Do not say it, do not say it ! ” she moaned. “ You shall not say it. That is the most awful of all. For my sake ! My God ! what we women must endure ! That I—I should have brought him to this,—Bengt, my Bengt, to this ! Oh ! say it is not true ! ”

And that—may He whose eyes are on the truth forgive me—that I could not tell her.

“ Guilty,” she moaned, “ guilty for my sake ! ”

I crawled into the saddle. She seized the bridle.

“ Has he gone back to the King ? ” she asked, passionately.

“ I hope so.”

“ Then find him, find him ! Tell him to die, die at the King’s side ! Oh ! my friend, my dear friend, save his honour and let him die at the King’s side, for my sake.”

That I could promise, and that I could perform.

She put her hand to her throat and unclasped the locket which hung there. “ It was Karl’s and the White Count-

ess's," she whispered. "The betrothed of the White Countess wore it when he fell at the King's side. It is all I have now. Keep it, Hugo, for the service you have done for your friend, Ebba Polenstjerna."

"Ebba !"

I put it in reverence about my neck, and if the Jews and the wenches came to play with the carrion on the morrow they should find it once more stained with the blood of one who had fallen by the side of a King of Sweden.

"May God bless you," she said, "and have you in His keeping, my friend. Good night !"

She knelt in the snow and I rode down the little path into the Secret Ford. The water came around me, swift and cold and strong ; the ice-blocks ground against my boots, but I heeded them not. I had gained the other bank and turned for one last look. My Lady was still kneeling ; the Princess waved the lantern ; I raised my hat. Such are the idle ceremonies with which men and women in a harsh world of pain pay homage to their humanity. But the Secret Ford had heard how by its grim banks a woman's heart, a heart tender and true, had been broken.

I found the tangled path and spurred into the wood.

"Halt !" suddenly cried a stern voice. "Halt !" I had been riding perhaps ten minutes in an enchanted forest, and the fierce command broke the charm. "Halt !" a hand was laid on my bridle. The pale rays of the moon streamed through the labyrinth of branches and fell on a naked sword six inches from my breast.

"Why, it is Martin !" the sword point dropped.

"My Lord Bengt !" I gasped out.

"What in the devil's name are you doing here in this wood alone ?" he demanded, wrestling with his surprise.

"What are *you* doing here, Herr Grefve ?" I rejoined, fiercely.

He laughed. "A very proper question. I am here on my own business."

"You swam the stream?" I asked faintly.

"Pooh! that is nothing to a Swede who has campaigned with my master. We don't want fords, we Swedes. And you have swum the stream yourself." I had, but not as a Trabant does.

"I seek," I said, meeting his eyes calmly, "I seek to-night your master, the King of Sweden."

"What?" he swung his sword into the scabbard. "No jesting now. I am not in a jesting humour."

For answer I told him rapidly what my errand was, though I did not tell him all.

"It is impossible," he muttered doggedly. "Impossible! The King at Menckywycz! It is impossible; you have been tricked."

"You will do well, Herr Grefve, to come with me and see," I said, with equal doggedness, and I rode forward.

"No," he said, sharply, "I do not leave this spot, nor do you. Pah! they have cozened you out of the way. They do not cozen me."

"Let go my bridle!" I said peremptorily.

"Do not be a fool," he answered, coolly; "you are worn out. You have been drinking and fighting, and I would save an honest fool from his folly."

I implored him again, but he held my bridle in an iron grip.

"Tell me," he demanded, "who were the two persons who brought you to the bank? One I can swear was that wanton, my cousin. Who was the other?"

"The other," I replied, "was your cousin, too, the——"

"Ebba!"

I nodded. He was exerting all his wonderful coolness to master his indignation. And in the silence a terrible thing happened—my cloak flew open at the throat.

"Traitor and liar!" he hissed, and he wrenched the locket from my neck. "You traitor and liar!" Murder steeled his eyes and jaw.

"The Countess gave me that locket, Herr Grefve," I said, angrily ; " I ride at her bidding. You will give it back to me."

He looked at me in blank astonishment.

" I warned you," he said, hoarsely. " You gave me your word and you have broken it. One of us two does not leave this wood alive. Dismount ! dismount, I say ! and by heaven ! I mean it."

" No," I said, quietly, " I will not dismount. I have not broken my word. I would not fight with you at any time, less now than ever, for I have a duty to perform. Give me my locket and let me go."

He laughed in my face. " Have done with that hypocrisy," he said. " I am sick of your airs of innocence. You shall be punished, you shall ! Dismount, or I'll run you through where you are !"

" As you please," I answered, " you can run me through when it suits you, and you know it, my Lord——"

" You——" he made a rush at me. I sat quite still. A movement in defence and I was a dead man, and the King would perish, and my Lady, and my would-be murderer too. Thank God ! I remained a coward and quite still.

" That won't save you," he growled, but he dropped his sword point. " You are found out, M. Martin——"

" Perhaps," I replied, recklessly ; " but am I the only man who has been found out ?"

" You are brave enough to insult," he said, with a great contempt.

" Oh, let me go, Herr Grefve," I pleaded, " let me go ! I will fight with you to-morrow when and where you will. It will not matter then. To-night my life is not my own. Let me go !"

He glared at me and his astonishment fought with his passion.

The precious minutes were ebbing away and I should be too late. I leaned down in the saddle and told him all,

pleading as I pleaded that night at Polenstjerna with Greta and Axel. He tried to interrupt me, but I would not be interrupted and my recital left him dazed. He walked up and down, stamping in the snow.

"Very good," he said, presently, and I could have cheered with joy. That was the voice of the Bengt I had known of old, the Bengt whose swift brain threaded its way to cold resolution through a maze of feeling hot as hell.

I caught his eye. I had won.

"Very good," he said, "I am coming with you. If what you say be true, we shall find a Swedish outpost not many miles from here."

I nodded with exultation.

"Pah!" he muttered, "you had better dismount and fight for the locket like a gentleman. Lose, and you die by a gentleman's sword, and that is better than the rope of the Provost Marshal."

"No," I said, faintly, smitten now with craven fear.

"Remember," he went on, "if your story be true and the King be there, he will deal with you. Remember that."

For answer I spurred my horse forward.

"I shall be spared," he said, "the trouble of soiling my sword with your rascally blood, and I shall have the pleasure of telling the King your news. Remember that."

I tried to ride on, but he stopped me.

"And if you lie," he said, "I will deal with you as you deserve. False or true, your part is played out. Remember that."

He fetched his horse and mounted. "Ride on," he commanded, coldly.

Instead I wheeled my horse alongside of his. "My part is played out," I answered, hotly, "but so, too, is yours, Herr Grefve. You are in the hands of your enemies, and nothing can save you now. The papers that you know of are in the keeping of Patkul. Nothing can save you,—nothing. Bah! you or the Provost Marshal can kill me:

that will not help you. You have played and lost—lost ! I never could have won, even if I had not been a fool. And if you see the Countess Polenstjerna again, you can ask her whether I broke my word to her and to you. To-morrow, remember that.”

“ Ride on,” he said, for my words had gone home.

“ Revenge,” I laughed ; “ yes, you will get revenge, and you will find how empty revenge can be. Take back that locket, my Lord, to the woman whose heart you have broken, and she——”

“ Silence ! ” he commanded.

“ —She will tell you what she bade me tell you,—that there is nothing left to you now but to die at your master’s side, and you will be happy if death comes to you before dishonour. Remember——”

“ Damn you ! ride on ! ”

I shook my fist in his face. “ You called me liar and traitor ! we will see who——” and there I stopped. Even in my anger, fear, and soreness of body there was that in his eyes which struck me dumb. My God ! may I never see such eyes again !

I turned my horse and rode on.

We galloped for an hour, spurring fiercely. Would I be in time, would I win back my locket before the Provost Marshal dealt with me ? Those were my thoughts. What his were may be guessed.

“ You are right,” my Lord cried out, pulling his horse upon his haunches. We were being sharply challenged.

“ It is a Swedish picket,” he exclaimed, excitedly. “ *Herre Gud !* the Life Guards ! ”

I reeled in my saddle. Patkul had spoken the truth ! The Life Guards ! then probably the King was here, here at Menckywycz !

A dull gleam of fire played will-o'-the-wisp on the skirts of the wood. Not two hundred yards away were two horsemen as still as statues.



Bengt called out in Swedish. An answering cry, a clatter of arms. As if by magic the two horsemen had become six.

My Lord rode forward. The horsemen were advancing to meet him. A fresh clatter of arms, the whinnying of horses, a buzz of joyous voices.

I saw the guard salute. My Lord Bengt was with the men of his race.

In a very few minutes he rode back, accompanied by three of the horsemen, soldiers just such as I had seen this morning, in faded, torn blue coats, with sheepskin cloaks, and mounted on wiry little horses.

"His Majesty is here," Bengt observed in French, "and now I am going to discover whether the rest of your story is true. After that," he added, with chilly politeness, "the King will decide. Good night to you !"

He raised his hat, and spurred away with two of the troopers.

I was a prisoner with the Swedes ! And how could I tell the King !





CHAPTER XIII

THE BLUE BOYS OF SWEDEN

"**I** SPEAK Swedish," I surprised the sergeant by saying. But he made no reply, save to pass some rough cord round my wrists.

"You will come this way," he muttered, gruffly, and he led me forward by the end of the cord. The two other troopers, after a stolid stare, rolled themselves into their sheepskins and lay down. The two sentinels sat motionless on their horses on the skirt of the wood. The sergeant left me to stand by the dying fire. I was horribly weary, aching in every limb, my head throbbing with pain, yet I scanned my surroundings with a thrilling interest. What a mighty contrast this tiny camp offered to the one I had seen at midday! Camp indeed! There was no camp, there were no trenches, no signs that here were soldiers. The picket was posted perhaps a quarter of a mile from the hamlet, another of those Polish collections of wretched cabins. In a circle round it smouldered a dozen dull watch-fires, and about each a score of figures and as many horses were huddled, anyhow, all sunk in the deepest slumber. Of waggons or carts, of Jews, wenches, or camp-followers, not a trace anywhere. The men for the most part had simply burrowed in the ground, hollowed out a sort of pit, and banked it up with snow and earth to keep off the worst of the wind. Some had not even taken that trouble, but, curled in their sheepskins, slept on the dank ground as if between the sweetest of sheets and the

cosiest of blankets. About the cabins themselves I could dimly pick out horses tethered, their owners doubtless sleeping within. The stillness, the careless disorder, the reckless contempt of the most ordinary prudence, were appalling. The watery moon shone down through the soft haze of a coming thaw on the snow, on the fringe of grisly wood, on a camp of the dead. Could these be the famous Swedish troops, these worn-out men with shrivelled brown faces, and scraggy horses? These were untrained boors, sleeping as hedgers sleep in the August fields of my leafy uplands in England.

Not a sound, not so much as the bark of a dog, broke the magic calm.

Patkul had reckoned but too well. It would be mere child's play to pounce on this paltry handful of sleep-besotted men and rumple them into carrion for his wenches to play with. With a shudder I recalled the swarthy men, the gay uniforms, the officers, the trumpets and drums, the guns and waggons. That was a camp of soldiers; this—I did not know what this was, but at dawn an army would come and break it in pieces as a potter's vessel. I had, indeed, come on a fool's errand. We were ruined!

"Come," said the sergeant. He had sprung out of the earth. "Come this way."

He dragged me forward by that felon cord towards the hamlet. My two guards sighed, shrugged their shoulders, and lay down with a grunt of content. They were asleep in their sheepskins almost before I had moved.

Not once, not twice, but a dozen times as I was dragged along, I stumbled in the dark over sleeping figures. They never stirred. They lay just as they had dropped, sleeping the last sleep they would have this side of the grave. Over the misty, moonlit plain rose, roamed, and returned the steady, gentle breathing of six hundred men sleeping.

Near the tumble-down cabin where I was halted my eye fell on a group by a fire that still glowed. Officers! I

recognised in a flash some of the faces which I had seen in the gallery of the King's House at Stockholm. Then their owners had been gay in all the bravery of silk and lace ; here they lay pell-mell, twisted across each other, for the most part in sheepskins, too, dirty and ragged. The worn-out furs of two proclaimed mockingly that once the wearers had been of the quality, had looked in the eyes of beauty on the staircase at Drottningholm, when the Queen-Mother gave her masquerades. "Trabants !" I muttered, "his Majesty's Trabants ! nobles everyone of them, the *Maison du Roi* of the King of Sweden, the comrades in birth and breeding of my Lady herself, sleeping like swinked hedgers or the vagrant on the parish rates."

Not a man stirred. Only once were we challenged in a low whisper. The sergeant whistled and all was still again.

"Fools ! Mad fools !" The White Countess had lured me on a fool's errand to fools.

A wild desire seized me to shout, to cry aloud. But I might have cried with lungs of bronze ; nothing could rouse these sleeping men, sleeping within a few miles of Patkul and thousands of their enemies. And even now as they slept the trumpets would be calling, the drums beating in that camp beyond the woods, summoning the soldiers to whom they belonged to issue forth and devour their prey. We were doomed. Through that grisly, misty, moonlit stillness the Angel of Death had spread his wings over Menckywycz, and already had claimed sleeping King, Trabants, and troopers for his own.

The sergeant flung the cabin door open and pushed me in. He passed another cord around my heels and turned in silence to go to sleep, poor fool, like the rest.

"I must see the King at once," I pleaded, passionately.

"You will see the King to-morrow," was the grim reply.

"Give me something to eat, for God's sake !"

"To-morrow you will get something to eat." He slammed the door and left me. To-morrow ! always to-

morrow ! I tumbled in a heap on the mouldy floor. The cords cut into my wrists, my legs were twisted under me. I was sick and faint, and I sobbed, sobbed because I had lost my Lady's locket, because I had failed to do her bidding. No sound outside: dirty, foul-odoured darkness around me, in which horrible crawling things crept over me. To-morrow I would see the King ; to-morrow I would get something to eat. To-morrow ! There would be no to-morrow for them or for me. There was only to-night, and I had lost my Lady's locket. Every minute I drew a breath in sweating anguish. They must be coming now—surely they would be bursting on us now—those cursed Saxons and that cursed Livonian ; and I, who knew, who could save the King, must die in this noisome cabin like a poisoned rat in a hole !

They had come ! I sat up, my head swimming with fever. Hark ! what was that ? Voices speaking at the door, one in particular with chill authority. Where had I heard that voice before ? I felt the sweat drip off my brow. Could it be——?

The blinding flash of a torch cut through the dirty darkness. Someone was staring in.

"Is this the spy ?" demanded the chill voice.

"Yes, your Majesty."

Great God ! it was the King ! To-morrow had come to-night ! I tried to rise to my feet, but my head was light, my legs numb ; I fell over.

Someone stuck the torch in the corner. The King made a sign with his hand ; I was alone with his Majesty King Charles XII.

He tossed his hat and huge gauntlets upon the table, sat down, and stared at me lying bound at his feet.

He stared at me and I stared at him.

Anything more unlike a king, anything more kingly, it was impossible to imagine. What I saw was a young man in a worn blue coat with brass buttons and a stained yellow belt. Great muddy boots, with muddy, rusty spurs, reached

half-way up his thighs ; one hand lay on the table, the other rested on the hilt of his ponderous sword. Both hands were dirty. Round his neck was twisted a soiled neckcloth of black taffeta. Of cloak or protection against the cold there was no trace. But his face, young, weather-beaten, impassive, majestic, the lips pressed together,—who could forget his face ? And those clear, deep blue eyes, mysterious as crystals,—they absorbed me as they had absorbed me before ; as the watcher on a lonely tower is absorbed on a winter night by the inscrutable stars.

“ You are not a Swede,” he said at last.

“ No.”

“ I have seen you before,” he said after a pause.

“ Yes, your Majesty. The last time was at Polenstjerna Castle.”

Not the twitch of a muscle. He regarded me unmoved.

“ I remember,” he said, distinctly. “ Your name is Martin ; you are English.” He pushed back the fair hair, already receding on his high forehead. How young he looked, a mere boy ! Was this the same King whom I had seen in a lace collar and with a flushed face at Kungsör ?

He crossed his hands, dirty hands, on his sword-hilt, rested his chin on them, and stared at me. When he spoke, it was as if he were thinking aloud.

“ What are you doing here ? ” he demanded.

I raised myself on my elbow and eagerly poured out my message, only to stop, faltering. He had leaned back in his chair ; he simply was not listening.

“ M. Martin,” he interrupted, “ when you said there were no treasonable papers at Polenstjerna you were lying.”

I almost laughed. That, then, was the problem !

“ Yes, sire, I was lying.”

He drove his chin into his hands. “ Why did you lie ? ” was the next question.

“ I lied to save the honour of the Grefvinna Polenstjerna,” I answered.

"There is no Grefvinna Polenstjerna," he corrected frigidly. "Do you mean Fröken Ebba?"

A frost gripped my heart. "She was not guilty," I said vehemently.

"And Fröken Ebba lied to save your honour," he interrupted, as if he were adding up a sum of figures. I fell back in black despair.

"No, sire, she told the truth," I protested.

"That is not true, M. Martin," he pronounced calmly.

"But, sire——"

"You will be good enough not to mention that woman's name in my presence," he commanded in his most icy and royal tones.

A slight pause.

"You had destroyed the papers because they were treasonable," he began again, as if he were starting the problem from the other end.

"Yes, sire." If only he would take his eyes off me! I could speak then, and the time was fleeting away.

"And you have come back as a spy." The remark was more to himself than to me.

I shook my head feebly.

"You will die to-morrow, M. Martin." Again I almost laughed. From another mouth it had sounded as a grim joke; from his it issued forth as the verdict of an inexorable destiny which neither he nor I could avert.

Five minutes of a stuffy silence. The cabin became insufferably hot, and the torch flared smokily in the darkness. They must be near at hand now.

"You are young," he remarked. I wonder if I looked it. I did not feel young. "Yet you are not afraid to die."

"When a man, sire, has done all he can," I said, with conviction, "it is best to die."

"That is true," he muttered to himself. He surveyed me, and the faintest twitter of interest stirred in his icy eyes.

“Your Majesty must listen !” I implored, and with the energy of despair I poured out anew my message. My head was light, but I said it so that he must hear.

He was as a man drugged with thought.

“Then you are not here,” he observed, with a ruffle of annoyed surprise, “you are not here to deliver yourself to justice ?” He pushed the hair back impatiently from his forehead. “You come from the castle of the Princess Rapierska ?” he questioned. “Was the Cardinal Primate there ?”

“No, sire.”

“You are lying again, M. Martin.” The tone was pitiless, and I lay on the floor in impotent frenzy.

“Your enemies, sire,” I shouted, “your enemies have taken a body of Swedes prisoners. I saw them myself this morning——”

His hand clutched involuntarily at his sword-hilt ; a gleam lighted up his face.

“Swedes ? Prisoners ?” But I had moved him at last.

He rose, opened the door, and gave a brief order.

“Prisoners,” I repeated, “prisoners of the Muscovites.”

Another gleam. He checked himself and sank into thought, but his fingers drummed softly on the table.

The sergeant had marched in. “The Herr Grefve and his squadron have not returned, your Majesty,” he said, “but two riderless horses have come back.”

Ha ! I sat up on my elbow. Ha !

“Let four of the Trabants go out and report,” replied the King without moving. The door had hardly closed when I heard a horse neigh and the thud of galloping hoofs speeding in a whirlwind into the night.

“They attack at dawn,” I said, feverishly, “Herr Patkul——”

Ha ! no mistaking the gleam this time. The corners of his mouth hardened. “Patkul ?” he repeated, quite fiercely.

"Yes, sire, — Patkul, — he is there. To-morrow your Majesty will be the prisoner of Herr Patkul."

The King laughed the merry laugh of a boy. It sounded so strange and so natural.

"He does not know my Blue Boys," was his comment, stated with passionless pride.

"They are thousands, thousands, sire ; will not your Majesty, while there is time, retire——"

"Retire !" he stood up. "I never retire." The words plumped out with the dull drop of a leaden bullet into icy water.

Once more I told him my message and who had sent me.

He stared, musing. If he baffled me, surely I was baffling him.

"And Patkul has told Fröken Ebba ?" he asked with a frozen smile.

"Ah ! God !" I burst out. "Cannot I make it clear to your Majesty ?" and for the tenth time I retold my story.

He listened enthralled ; but it was the problem, not the news, that fascinated him.

"At least, sire," I implored, "believe a man who dies to-morrow. They are ten thousand against——"

"The more the merrier," said he, smiling. "When they come we shall be ready for them and we shall have warm play. Good night, M. Martin."

"Oh, sire ! listen," I cried ; "if not for your sake, for the sake of Sweden. Listen, I beseech your Majesty !"

He turned, still musing. "What have I done for Sweden," was the astonishing answer, "that I should think of her ?"

"Then will your Majesty ask Count Bengt Polenstjerna?" I moaned in one last effort.

"Count Bengt ! He was killed months ago," he murmured, coldly.

The sergeant had not told him ! I fell back speechless. I had put the finishing touch. I had convinced him that it

was he, and not I, who had been dealing with a madman. We were in the grip of an inexorable destiny. Ah ! the White Countess had not appeared to mock us, but to warn of a disaster to the King. Lützen—Fehrbellin—and now it would be Menckywycz. Nothing could save us,—nothing !

His hand was pushing the door slowly ; I could see the clear stars shining through ; the night air blew in cold. All was as silent as the grave. Suddenly through the bewitched stillness a trumpet blew. You must hear it as I heard it, lying bound on a filthy floor, to know with what sublime echoes of another world a trumpet may sound, blowing across chill mists to a slumbering camp, blowing in the dead of night from woods afar off. It blew again. It was nearer—it was ! They had come, come at last !

I sat up. Far away a challenge—a challenge sharp and hoarse—a shot ! Another shot ! a dull cry, taken up and sweeping like fire in a circle round us ; half a dozen shouts, the neigh of horses, the stamping of feet, a din of men.

I struggled to my feet. “The Muscovites, sire, the Saxons, Patkul !” I roared in joy and fell down. They had come, come at last. This was the truth that lay in vodka. I would not die by the sword of Bengt or the rope of the Provost Marshal ; not like a poisoned rat in a hole, but by the side of the King. If only I had my Lady’s locket !

Not ten yards from us a bugle blew fiercely and was answered by defiant trumpets from the woods all round.

“Riga !” broke from the listening King. “Riga !” His mind had sprung back to Kungsör where I had “lied” once before.

Out was whipped his great sword ; in a trice he had slashed off my felon cords.

“*Herre Gud !*” he shouted merrily, “we shall have some play. Get a sword, man, and strike for your life.” He crushed his hat down on his temples. Never was a man so transformed. The inscrutable, starlike look had vanished from his eyes ; he was simply a rollicking Berserker, a boy

glowing with the joy of battle, yet as cool as the ice on Lake Mälär.

I leaped into the darkness beside him, infernal darkness rent with jagged splashes of fire. Shot succeeded shot, cry, cry. Men and horses rushed this way and that, madly and coolly at the same time, for the roar and the shouts and the din came chiefly from the woods. Fighters had sprung out of the ground, from the cabins, from the watch-fires, from nowhere. I dashed at a snowpit, grabbed a horse and a sword. I was with a knot round the King. Everywhere men swarmed, some only in their shirts. But the sentinels had done their work, and, though all was wild confusion, with incredible swiftness the squadrons had lined up armed, here, there, everywhere, in solid, silent groups. In five minutes, less than five minutes, that scattered camp of sleepers had rushed into a drilled host where every man knew his post and had found it. The King galloped hither and thither ; the sight of him was enough ; officers galloped backwards and forwards ; orders were given, and obeyed before they were given.

The camp-fires blazed up, pools of light in the misty dark. Out there our sentinels were fighting amid a hellish hubbub. The pickets were falling back, grimly, doggedly, but contesting every inch, and every inch meant a few seconds to us here. Hell was let loose, and its devils were upon us; but we were ready. There would be no Swedish prisoners to-day, and no quarter. If only I had my locket ! For we were about to go down fighting, sword in hand.

Where was the King ? Ah ! there he was. I spurred in amongst the Trabants. A rider tore past me, the nostrils of his horse red in the firelight ; blood streamed across the man's face, blood ran along his sword. It was Bengt ! He recognised me. " You were right," he found time to shout; he wheeled, and was alongside of the King.

" The main body are there, sire," he said, coolly, waving his sword. The King nodded, looking about him with a

sublime calm. I saw a dark, ragged mass, a thunder-cloud, bursting from the wood on our right, and rolling down on us with a roar. They were thousands, and we perhaps a hundred.

“Charge !” called his Majesty, sharply.

Like an avalanche we were hurled forward. Nothing could have stopped us, not all the devils in hell with Satan and Patkul at their head. We were as compact as a cannon-ball and as swift, and we went through that black thunder-cloud as a tumbler at a fair goes through a paper hoop. I was my grandfather at Naseby or Marston Moor. To right and left of me sheepskin arms were slashing, and I slashed, too, howling and praying together.

“Re-form ! Wheel to the right !” called the King. His voice steadied us as Kätchen’s icy water had steadied my vodka-sodden brain. My little horse swung round and pressed into the troop ; a dozen others had pressed in on either hand. The King cast a glance at us—one glance as of sheet lightning.

“Charge !” he commanded. I jammed in my heels. It was not necessary. Down went the little horse’s head,—a roar,—I was slashing a second time. I was wrenched from the saddle, I was battered, I was wrenched into the saddle again. We were amongst them. Their line stooped like August corn before the gale. God ! we were through them ! The man on my left was bleeding, my own breath came in spurts of pain, and my throat felt raw. There were gaps, too, in our files. The din was cruel. Here, there, everywhere men were swearing, sobbing, gasping, hacking, slashing.

“Re-form to the left !” rang out that clear, boyish voice through the roar. We tightened up in a snap of the fingers. There were no gaps.

“Charge !”

We were through them again and had reined up. The blood boiled in my ears. I dug my knees into the saddle and gripped a twist of mane to hold myself up. The hovel

had been fired and the clearing was as light as day. The King was surveying the field, standing up in his stirrups. The serenity of his face lay like balm on our squadron. What we had been doing in our corner others had been doing in theirs. Amidst the hideous surge of the flames, the shouts and yells, the clash of sword on sword, of pike on pike, I saw black men galloping for the woods. We were winning, winning ! nothing could stop us now. It was ten to one, fifty to one. Ha ! the more the merrier ! I laughed, the more the merrier !

I would have their blood, I would slit them till they shrieked for mercy, I would fatten on the gore of the slain——

“ Charge ! ”

We were on the rear of a troop of Muscovites. At our shout they tried to wheel, and into a struggling mass we swept. God help them ! God help them ! They were at our mercy, entangled, locked, huddled as sheep headed off by mad dogs. Ha ! I had cut down one, another, a third, and I was the feeblest of our band. My jaws dripped, my tongue was athirst. Drunk, sobbing, laughing, praying, I was clear at last. I could go no farther, we could go no farther, and the rest of that wretched crew bounded from us into the flames of the hovels.

I must stop. I grasped the neck of my horse, sick and bloody. I wiped my eyes. Ah ! a knot of black devils flashed red from behind the blazing cabins ; their swords gleamed, their eyes were the eyes of the damned seeking safety from the justice of God. They were on the King ! they were striking at him ! “ The King ! ” I heard Bengt shout, “ save the King ! ”

In went my spurs, I was in the midst of the devils, slashing. “ Too late ! ” I howled, “ Too late ! ” The roaring cabins blinded me in a sheet of blood and flame—a man mountains high towered over me, and with a last yell I struck at him with all my might.

"They fly, they fly!" a far-off voice pierced in to my ears.

A trumpeter with crimson cheeks was blowing, blood-red drums were beating, we were re-forming, my horse was re-forming, we had re-formed. I was still in the saddle, but I could not see the King. Swords were shooting like the northern lights in an October sky, men were triumphantly crying—ah! there was the King! Saved! God save the King!

He rode along, serene, boyish, majestic, his hat off, while a roar went up. I drew a deep breath; one effort more, just one effort more, and I threw up my hat with the rest. The blood dripped along my blade upon my wrist. And yonder was the dawn, stealing up, defiant in streaks of gore above the black rim of the woods. We had won. They were flying, they were broken, they were gone. Hurrah! Hurrah! We had won! God save the King!

I prayed. The infernal web of lust and treachery woven with the steel of Satan had been rent asunder as gossamer by the Blue Boys of Sweden, and I was one of them, one of the Blue Boys!

Bengt was in front of our line, hatless, pale, calm, triumphant, noble. The King came trotting, always trotting, towards us. I tried to salute as Bengt was saluting—the bloody, dirty snow rose up and smote me between the eyes—the King's horse leaped upwards and trotted out of sight—and I was walking on the Terrace at Polenstjerna, book in hand, Greta was singing in her sweet voice "*Liten Karin*"—I was waiting for the vision of my Lady with the salt of the Batlic blowing in my face as the dawn of May climbed out of the shivering grey sea.

I opened my eyes in pain. Where was I? The day was here; I was lying on my back and something was heavy on my feet. I pushed it off. Pah! it was a dead man. Of course—we had won, but where was the King who—

I pushed the drink away. "Curse the vodka! I'll drink

no more. Come, Kätchen, let me up, I 'll have that password or—I must tell the King——”

The vodka was forced down my throat. I sat up. Yes, it was day, and cold, oh! so cold.

Not a dozen yards from me stood the King with two or three others. All around me were troopers, sitting in the snow, watching the King as a dog watches his master. The King's eyes rested on me, no longer, thank God! as they had done last night. He took a stride forward.

“ M. Martin,” he said, “ I ask your pardon.”

The sergeant held me up.

“ Your hand, sir,” said his Majesty, and I was shaking hands,—I, Hugh Martin, shaking hands with the King! while something like a cheer rumbled about us.

“ The enemy—Patkul—sire? ” I faltered.

The King smiled and the earth ceased to rock under my feet.

“ Gone,” he answered. “ They have visited us. It is our time to visit them. Will you come? ”

“ Surely, sire.”

The King marched away. My eye lighted upon stark figures lying everywhere, figures lying face upwards as the man had lain in the courtyard. God! the ground was spattered with them as thick as the clods where a ditcher has been busy.

An officer stepped up to me. “ Are you hurt, sir? ” he asked.

“ Hurt? No. I am all right.” The King's smile had made me well, and I wanted to sing.

“ I see you are a Swede,” said he, smiling; “ we Swedes need no physician but his Majesty.” He paused. “ You have saved the King,” he began shyly, “ and brought us back the Grefve Polenstjerna from the dead.” What was he talking about? “ Will you do me the honour of shaking hands? ”

He would have said more, but a trumpet cut us short. The troopers were mounting and lining up. I mounted too. A great and a holy peace lay on my spirit.

Were these the men who had fought like fiends last night? these few hundreds of weather-beaten peasants, lounging in their saddles, dirty, ragged, many with bloody bandages around heads and arms? these the officers, these the nobles of Sweden? Aye! these were soldiers and nobles, and thick on the trampled snow lay the proofs, dead Muscovites, Poles, Saxons, Cossacks. For these were the Trabants of the King and the Blue Boys of Sweden.

His Majesty called out an order. In the silence of a flash of steel the troopers had wheeled, circled in and out. And here we were in serried troops, blades naked, in battle array as I had seen them last night.

The King's eye swept along the ranks. An answering light from their eyes greeted him. Were they not here "For God, the Protestant Cause, and Sweden"?

The King beckoned to me. "You will lead us to their camp, M. Martin," he said.

"But it is entrenched, and they have guns," I protested. I saw the ford jammed in between the woods, the river, the marshes, and the ice-blocks.

"*Det skäder nit,*" smiled his Majesty. "Lead on, M. Martin."

I turned my horse meekly towards the woods. To protest, to disobey with those clear eyes upon me, was impossible.

An idea flashed into my mind. I spoke earnestly to the King. "Halt!" cried he, and made a sign, while at his bidding I explained what my idea was. The officers and I conversed eagerly, the King listening, stroking his chin but saying nothing. At last the officers were agreed and we waited for his Majesty to decide. One minute of brooding, and then he gave an order. Bengt, with two hundred of the Life Guards, rode away.

"Forward!" cried the King, and our little band moved along the track by which Patkul had advanced and fled.

We moved very slowly, halting every half-hour. Not even in the halts did the King say anything. Three, four

hours passed in this way. From time to time we pushed out cautious scouts. When at last one of our advance guard came galloping back with "the enemy" in his face, his Majesty became impatient.

"Can we advance now?" he inquired of me, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

I made a rapid calculation. It was a good four hours since Bengt had left us. "When your Majesty pleases," was my answer.

Our line shook out. We had rumbled up their outposts on the fringe of the woods fronting the camp. The sentinels had scampered across the ford. The King rode forward to reconnoitre the position. Under our feet wound the river and that *tête du pont* of a ford which not even *monsieur le petit Abbé*, Prince Eugène, could have forced, as the Graf had said, and he had been at Zenta. A flash of smoke, an ugly roar; they were firing at us. I longed to crouch behind the trees, but I feared the King. His cheeks flushed, and the Berserker fire glowed in his eyes.

The officers and I stared anxiously towards the south. There was no sign. Another puff of smoke; about ten yards from me a tree went down with a crash, and I was sick for fear.

"We cannot wait," I heard the King mutter, and he galloped back to his men.

"Charge!" came the sudden order.

The officers at my elbow shrugged their shoulders, gripped their swords, and threw back their cloaks to free their arms. It was madness, sheer madness; we were going to destruction, but the King was going, too. That was enough.

Down the slippery bank we raced, into the river helter-skelter, anywhere; at least the others plunged in anywhere, but I confess that I took good care to head straight for the ford. We were struggling up the other bank when a triumphant trumpet blared from the woods to the south.

An appalling cheer burst from our men. Bengt had come ! My plan had succeeded ! The Secret Ford had brought them right upon the flank and rear of the camp. Look up yonder ! See ! See ! Swedish troopers were pouring out like wolves on the prey.

But even before that the Saxons, though two to one, had broken. Men who charged guns with cold steel, who assaulted a camp across a river as if it were a meadow, were not men ; they were in league with the Evil One. This was not war, but pure devilry ; they were right. They did not wait for us, but bolted like rabbits in a field disturbed at feeding-time. Our men had the execution of them when and where they pleased. In fifteen minutes it was all over. We cut a couple of score to pieces, took a hundred or so prisoners, and the camp was ours. After all, we had only a miserable rear-guard to deal with. The night and its work had been enough for the main body, and they had already fled, leaving their waggons, the food, and at least fifty of their tawdry wenches. Gone was Patkul, gone were the roystering officers, gone were the men who had sung and revelled round the fires, gone were Kätchen and the Graf ! And we were obliged to let them run unmolested, for even our horses could do no more. We halted at the blast of the trumpet and I broke my fast, sitting on a tub outside the reeking cabin where the truth that lay in vodka had been revealed to me, and about me lay the ruins of the host that would have made peace with their feet on the neck of King Charles.

As I thankfully munched the pasty that yesterday I could not stomach, the cries of women made me run to see what had happened. My friend the sergeant and a handful of ragged troopers were driving those tawdry wenches from the camp,—driving them at the switches' point into the woods back to the soldiers to whom they belonged. They were soldiers' damsels, and they had no place with the men of King Charles, with the Blue Boys of Sweden. It was the King's orders, and before long these same ragged troopers

would be driving King Augustus and his *mignonnes*, his sluts of quality, back to their palaces and those who lived in them.

Whither would we ride next, and why? As well ask the wind whither and why it blew. God alone, in whose rule and governance are the hearts of kings,—God alone could say. He alone would dispose and turn the heart of the King of Sweden. And it was for us, who knew whose authority he had, to obey, and it was good to obey.

The kettle-drums began to beat. What was this? The men were lining up as if for parade, but without their horses. The kettle-drums rattled out a second time. His Majesty took off his hat and knelt down in the mud and the snow, and we all knelt down with him. And there in the camp we had taken, we soldiers prayed with the King, prayed and thanked God for the great mercies which He had vouchsafed to us, His servants, that with outstretched arm He had given us the victory over our enemies. His Majesty paused when he had finished his prayer, and, still on his knees, began to chant a hymn, the favourite hymn of the Great Gustavus, the hymn of Luther,—“*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*” (“A sure stronghold our God is He”):

“ Still is He with us in the fight,
By His good gifts and spirit;
E’en should they take our life,
Goods, honour, children, wife—
Though all of these be gone,
Yet nothing have they won:
God’s kingdom ours abideth.”

On our knees we officers and soldiers sang it with him and it swelled out in mighty organ tones. The hymn died away. There was a majestic stillness. The King was repeating to himself the Lord’s Prayer. With bowed heads and tears we repeated it too, taking the words from our King’s lips: “Deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen!”



CHAPTER XIV

THE JUSTICE OF KING CHARLES XII.

AT midday we were riding through the woods to the castle of the Princess Rapierska, along the tracks that had first been made by the Graf's men and that were now thick with the hoofmarks of the galloping Life Guards whom the Secret Ford had flung on their foe. The wood had lost all its terrors: it was no longer a forest of lies but the forest through which men marched to the truth.

In front of our files the King trotted along in silence, gazing forward as if his mind brooded on mighty projects and would pierce the veil that hid the future. It may have been so; it may have been that there was nought in his mind; no man could say. There he rode, hat crushed down on his temples, in his simple stained blue coat, disdainful of cloak or sheepskin, gazing in front of him, and it never entered the head of anyone to address him. Behind trotted Trabants and Life Guards, jesting, whispering; the sombre loneliness of that infinite forest ringing with the rattle of bridles, the clank of swords on booted thighs, the continuous snap of branches. We talked eagerly, but every eye was riveted on the blue shoulders in front, and a wrinkle in the stained cloth would have cast us into line, and a motion of the gauntleted hand hurled us into a charge.

The wood thinned. The castle, misty, defiant, vast, sprang into our ken. Something like a sob shook itself along our files. His Majesty came to a dead halt, paused while a man

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might draw breath, and then took off his hat. The tears trickled over our cheeks ; right up there in the faint breeze above the topmost tower floated a great Swedish flag, the ensign of the conquering Three Crowns. And despite the fear of the King a cheer broke from the ranks to greet it, the Swedish flag, flying on a strange castle in a strange land. To these soiled, worn, and victorious soldiers it spoke of home—the home that some who were riding with the King to-day would never see again. But to me,—to me it was much more ; it proclaimed that behind those Polish walls beat one true Swedish heart that had endured all things, dared all things, hoped all things, for the sake of Sweden and Sweden's King.

A man was riding towards us from the castle. His Majesty touched his horse with the spur. My reins dropped. The man riding to meet us was the Graf !

“ The Princess Rapierska greets your Majesty,” he said, hat in hand, “ and begs me to assure you, sire, that her castle is at your Majesty's disposal. Two of the household of the Princess, at her request, acted as guides to the troops that crossed at the ford yonder. I presume I may congratulate your Majesty on a second victory.”

“ We have taken the camp and such of the enemy as would stay,” replied the King, briefly. He had cut a small army to pieces ; he had stormed with cavalry an entrenched camp across a half-frozen river, but his eyes betrayed how he quailed before a castle held in his name by two women, one of whom had once been a subject of his own.

“ Yonder,” began the Graf, “ are four-and-twenty of your Majesty's subjects whom I had the honour to bring here this morning.”

“ My subjects !” repeated the King, “ I have no subjects here.”

The Graf's face twitched. “ They were prisoners yesterday, sire: to-day they are free men.”

‘ Graf,’ I burst in, “ what have you done ? ”

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“ This is the man, sire,” I stammered, as the King turned sharply in his saddle, “ who revealed to me the plot ! ”

“ I thank you,” said his Majesty, simply. “ How come you here ? ”

A joyous shout interrupted the reply ; the shout came from four-and-twenty men in blue coats, most of them still in their bloody bandages, waving their swords and hats. The shout was taken up behind us, again and again.

“ My Swedes,” said the King, and there were tears in his eyes. “ My Swedes again, thank God ! ”

Without another word he rode towards them, leaving us two together.

“ Welcome, welcome, my bookworm ! ” the Graf cried, embracing me with deep emotion.

“ And Kätchen ? ” I whispered.

He tried to smile. “ *Herr Gott !* I did my best, but she is half a Pole, half a German, and she could not stomach the King of the Swedes. You must forgive her ; her reasons are her own, she is a woman,” he added.

Half my joy was gone. She would not come, just because she was a woman and had a woman’s heart.

The Graf put his hand on my shoulder. “ It is not your fault,” he muttered. “ She will go back to Dresden and forget, and so will you.”

I took his hand and pressed it in silence.

Down there his Majesty was striding about on foot amongst his Swedes. A brief question to this man, a short remark to that, a smile for a third ; one he tapped approvingly on the chest, but for the most part there was silence, magic silence. Such were the strange arts by which he unconsciously made himself lord of their souls and master of their bodies. It was for this silent, frosty King—so the world called him, the world which only saw him from afar—a King whose eyes could be boyish in their glee, in whose starry clearness fun and laughter lurked,—it was for the King whom *they*, not the world, knew, that they charged



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entrenchments with the naked steel and charged home. If he had then and there begun to play snowballs with his Trabants, as one of them told me he did sometimes, I should not have been surprised—I, who knew how he had received the great Aurora, I, who had cowered before him as a felon in a noisome cabin, who had fought with him in flames and darkness, and had knelt with him in prayer.

“Tell me,” pleaded the Graf, “for God’s sake ! tell me. You have heard my story. I will have yours, this instant.”

I told him what there was to tell.

His eyes flashed. “We shall make a soldier of you yet,” he cried, wringing my hand again and again. “Oh ! that I had been with you !”

“But you have been fighting.”

“A mere twopenny rabble of a *mêlée*. I was too drunk,” he winked, “to go with that Livonian beast, and when they came back the wenches could have flogged ’em into surrender with broomsticks. *Diantre !* you should have seen the camp ! In ten minutes I had done the trick. We and those Swedes broke out—that is all. Why, I don’t believe I spitted a single man worth fighting with.”

“And what happened next ?”

The Graf laughed. “A couple of hundred Swedes,” he cried, “came prancing through the gardens of the castle. A ford, a secret ford ! God ! you should have heard the yelps. The Polish women are still praying in the cellars to all their saints. *Pouf !* if it had been my *reiters* there had been some reason to pray, and not all the saints in heaven could have saved ’em. But those Swedes did not stop so much as to ask if there were cellars,—much less who was in them.”

“No,” I said, “they had other work in hand than to dally with Polish wenches.”

“That King,” murmured the Graf, “knows something of the art of war. Why, man, it would make *le petit abbé*, Prince Eugène, green with jealousy, if he could be jealous. To flank them like that and to force the *tête du pont* at the

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same time ! *Potztausend !* I am glad he was not at Zenta against us."

"That," I said, smiling, "was not the King's idea."

"Bengt?" he rasped out.

"No, nor Bengt. That, if you must know, was the device of a bookworm who saw a camp for the first time yesterday, and his Majesty was pleased to think there was something in it."

"What?" howled the Graf, in consternation.

I laughed. "Did you ever hear of one Polybius?" I inquired, slyly.

"Who?" He scratched his head.

"Polybius."


"Is he an Englishman?"

I shook with laughter. "No, no, Graf; he was a Greek who wrote centuries ago about a much greater captain than even *Monsieur le petit abbé*,—a gentleman called Hannibal. Bookworms read such things, or used to, and thanks to Polybius, I persuaded his Majesty to play a trick on Herr Patkul which he will not forget in a hurry, I hope."

"You! you!" he exclaimed. "Well, may I—" He choked. Not even oaths could help him.

"It is monstrous," he said, "monstrous! I have been a soldier thirty years; I fought under a marshal of France, le Vicomte de Turenne, I have been taught by Prince Eugène, and may I be damned if you and your King of Sweden do not break every law that the great captains have laid down! That six hundred men should—" he stamped in the snow.

It was incredible. But there was the King, and there were the six hundred, with the blood of their foes scarcely dry on their swords as they lounged, dirty and ragged, in their saddles, waiting patiently for the next command. No, it was not Polybius, not even the King of Sweden. My grandfather was nought but a simple yeoman in the Eastern counties, knowing more of ploughshares and pruning-hooks



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than of swords and spears, but when God raised up the Lord General Cromwell to deliver my own people from bondage, the Lord General, who was a yeoman too, not trained in the schools of the great captains, my grandfather became a colonel of horse ; and under the guidance of the Lord General and the blessing of God he and his yeomen taught to Prince Rupert and even to the veteran Leslie some lessons that the quality of England will never forget, strive though they may. And these Swedes were men of the same stuff, with the same high spirit in their calling, men who had the fear of God before them and made some conscience of what they did. And God's blessing rested on them and would rest on them. For vengeance is not ours, nor is victory a thing to be won without prayer and a pure heart.

"But see," the Graf interrupted my thoughts, brusquely, "the King would enter the castle, and desires us to go with him. Much yet remains to be done." His voice had grown stern and fierce resolution lay in his burning eyes and pale lips.

We mounted and rode forward. "Ah, yes!" I murmured, wearily, there was much to be done yet.

The Princess had kept her word. Her allegiance was transferred. It could be read in that flag of the Three Crowns, in the armed servants drawn up to receive his Majesty, servants staring awestricken at this soiled counterfeit of a King. Poor Princess ! Her dream had been to receive the King of Sweden with the Cardinal at her right hand, and to pass from him to the other King, her master, with triumphant peace as her gift, *La Paix des Dames*. And to-day, still beautiful to intoxicate, she was receiving with humble submission the boy sovereign, who had trampled on the forces of her master. Master ! she had no master now. Beside her was my Lady, all in white, with such sorrow, pride, and fear in her dear face that it struck the King, as it struck me, dumb.

What would the King do ?

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He took off his hat, and bowed coldly to the Princess in his most royal silence. At my Lady he could not look.

Do you wonder? There barred his way the daughter of his father's servant, whom he had deprived of her castle and her nobility, her pure, tender eyes proudly asking for justice—nothing but justice.

Spurs clashed on the floor. The blood rushed into my Lady's cheeks and left them. I knew who it was. It was my Lord Bengt.

"Business awaits your Majesty in the salon," said the Princess, with a low obeisance; "will your Majesty be pleased to enter?"

The King bowed a second time. His eyes rested on the Princess. He had heard her story, and an icy scorn strove with the courtesy that was her due. His great boots went clattering over the floor. He passed into the salon, gazing straight in front of him.

The Princess flushed, for she, too, was fighting with her feelings. Then she led my Lady away with her.

The Graf turned to Bengt. "You will follow," he said curtly; then he laid a pleading hand on my arm, and led me forward.

Four of the Trabants stalked after us. An order was given, and the hall filled with the dull rattle of the Swedish Guard grounding arms.

We were all of us in the power of the King of Sweden.

A splendid log fire blazed in the chimneypiece. The King stood in the middle of the room, so rich with its costly furniture from France; his Majesty was surveying the muddy tips of his boots, his fingers twitching on the hat which was under his arm.

The Graf softly closed the doors, and the four Trabants, impassive as statues, ranged themselves in front of them.

The Princess raised her head and made the faintest motion to the Graf.

"Your Majesty," he began at once, very slowly, and very

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calmly, "I have something which I desire to say. May I say it?"

The King's eyes roamed round the room. "Proceed," he said, to the tapestried wall.

"Until yesterday," the Graf said, "I, the Graf von Waldschlösschen, was in the service of the King of Poland——"

"There is no King of Poland," interrupted the King.

The Graf accepted the correction with an inclination of the head. "In the service of the Elector of Saxony," he pursued. "As such, two years ago I came to Sweden—to Polenstjerna Castle——"

A faint exclamation broke from the corner where my Lady was standing. The King stood unmoved.

"I went to Polenstjerna Castle at the bidding of the Elector of Saxony to plot for a rising to follow the capture of the city of Riga——"

A swift glance from the King's eyes fell upon myself.

"That," said the Graf, wheeling round on Bengt, "that is the man with whom I was invited to plot, that is the man with whom I plotted."

Bengt took the gesture and the King's look with a composure almost sublime.

"Speaking on my honour as a gentleman, to you, sire," the Graf continued, his voice rising, "and before God, I, who plotted, say that the Countess Polenstjerna is innocent."

"That," said Bengt, with a distinctness that echoed through the room, "that is the truth, on my honour as a gentleman, and before God!"

The Graf bowed to the King and fell back. It was for his Majesty to speak.

"I understand, Herr Graf," his Majesty began, after an awful pause, "that you were in the service of the Elector of Saxony?"

The Graf assented.

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"And you have deserted your master?" The King's eyes were as steel.

The Graf bowed.

"What is it that you desire from me, Herr Graf?"

"Justice, sire."

"Your master," said the King, icily, "is the master to give you justice."

"I have renounced my master, and I renounce him again, because he has refused, and will refuse, to give me justice."

He whipped out his sword, broke it across his knee, and cast the pieces on the floor. My Lady was sobbing and I was sobbing, too.

"He saved your Majesty's life," pleaded the Princess. "You, sire——"

The King simply looked her up and down, and the look froze her tears.

"The Herr Grefve Polenstjerna," he said, in those terrible tones of serene conviction, "has twice saved his master's life: once at Narva, and again last night."

He dropped into silence, and we waited listlessly. Whatever the King did, he would do of himself.

"M. Martin," he commanded, suddenly, "be good enough to repeat to me what you said last night."

So I told my story as simply as I could, sparing nothing, concealing nothing. We were here to tell the truth and to accept what the truth awarded. In the middle of my recital his Majesty sat down at a table, and was absorbed in his thoughts, just as he had been in that noisome cabin before the fight.

I had finished. He brushed the hair off his forehead. He sat up. "M. Martin," he demanded, "who was it that revealed to you the news of the attack on Riga?"

"The Herr Graf von Waldschlösschen," I stammered.

"Why?" The King's chair grated round to bring him face to face with the Graf.

"Because," the Graf replied, in a low voice, "I was sorry

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for what I had done, because I wished to save the innocent whom I had wronged, and," he added with an emphasis that was stunning, "I wished to save myself from the Grefve Polenstjerna."

"What do you mean?" This very sternly.

"I desired to persuade my friend, Count Karl, to confess to your Majesty——"

"Count Karl was guilty, then?" The King's sternness was increasing.

"Yes. And I desired to save him in that way. But I was too late, too late."

"Two years ago," his Majesty questioned, pitilessly, "two years ago, you, Herr Graf, had decided to betray your master?"

My heart sank at this strange justice in the King's mouth.

"Yes," said the Graf, quietly.

"What had your master done?"

I looked up. The Princess's hands were tightly clasped. The Graf let his eyes linger on her face. One man's eyes met the eyes of one woman in an empty salon—that was all.

"My master," he said, "by a lie had robbed me of the woman whom I loved, and I learned in Sweden that he had sent me to die by the hands of the executioner of your Majesty——"

"Explain," interrupted his Majesty, with a haughty gesture.

"If the plot against Riga failed, or if the rising in Sweden failed,—and the latter, the Elector of Saxony knew, was almost certain, I, sire, was to be handed over to your Majesty, to your justice, and my master would deny——"

"Take care!" commanded the King; "you are here to tell the truth."

"Yes," said the Graf, coolly, "to tell the truth. And lest I should tell the truth, my master, the King—the Elector of Saxony, flung me into the Königstein, at the request

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of the Herr Grefve Polenstjerna. Count Bengt has already admitted the truth of *that* in the presence of these ladies."

Silence.

The Graf slowly flung back his cloak. A strap lay across his coat, and to it was fastened a large wallet with a seal on the lock. The Graf put the wallet with a bow on the table beside the King.

"I leave your Majesty," he said, "to judge whether I tell the truth of the Elector of Saxony, once my master. That case, sire, is the despatch case of his Highness. It was in the keeping of Herr Patkul, but he was in such a hurry this morning that he forgot to take it with him."

Then the King laughed. We all laughed,—why, God knows! but we had come to the point when if men and women do not laugh they go mad.

The King surveyed his muddy boots fully five minutes. Then he turned to me.

"M. Martin," he said, "is skilled at finding documents which do not exist. You will open this despatch case."

His Majesty watched me break the seal, a seal with the royal arms of Poland. It did not escape him, nor the attention of all present, that until I wrenched it off the seal was absolutely intact.

"Ah!" said the King, quietly. "There are papers this time! M. Martin, you will examine them carefully, arrange them, and note their contents. We shall await your report."

He wheeled his chair round and stared at the fire. No one stirred save myself. I ventured to sit down, for the King gave no sign of heeding my mute appeal.

A solemn hush filled the salon, as the peace of twilight softly quenches the heat of a dying midsummer's day. Seated at the table, I could hear the leaden ticking of the clock. That and the rustle of the papers I heard distinctly, as though they belonged to another man at work and to another world.

In half an hour I had sorted the documents, but I had to

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bow three times before the King noticed me. Then he wheeled his chair back so as to command the room.

"Well, sir?"

"I have divided the papers into three bundles, sire." The King nodded. "The bulkiest does not refer to affairs of State."

"Affairs of State?"

I plucked up courage and looked at him, that I might look at no one else.

"It is a bundle of—letters, written by different ladies to his Majesty, the King of Poland."

"There is no King of Poland," interrupted his Majesty.

The Princess, I felt, had let her hands drop. She leaned against the tapestry wearily.

"Put that bundle in the fire, M. Martin," said his Majesty.

I hurled it with pleasure upon the hungry logs. The King watched the love-letters twist and curl into ashes.

"And the second bundle?" he questioned.

"Papers and notes," I answered, "between the King of—the Elector of Saxony and his Majesty, the Czar of Muscovy, the draft of a treaty written by Herr Patkul,"— I faltered at the fierce blaze in the blue eyes—"and—and his Majesty's—the Elector's authority for the attack of last night."

I was handing these documents to the King.

"Put them in the fire," he ordered brusquely. The involuntary gesture that what Patkul had touched and written would pollute him was superb.

"But your Majesty——"

"Do what I tell you, sir."

I dropped them after the love-letters into the hottest flames. After all, last night and the Blue Boys had made these papers as worthless as the sighs and vows of deluded women. Some time, for the women, as for the men, the day of reckoning would come, if it had not come already.

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The terrible moment had arrived.

“ Well, sir ? ” the King demanded.

I was as the hunted animal in the toils. The eyes of all in the salon were fixed on me. I took up the third bundle.

“ These, sire,” I said at last, in a low voice, “ these papers must be for your eye alone. I cannot describe them.”

The King’s gaze met mine in a swift, soul-piercing inquiry. A question moved his lips, he suppressed it, and took the papers from me. One by one he read them, slowly, doggedly. Then he laid them down on the table. I thought he would spring to his feet ; his hand trembled on the hilt of his sword. But his adamant will asserted itself. He stretched his legs out, and allowed his chin to drop into the collar of his coat. Two beads of sweat oozed out on his brow.

We stood in a trance. My vague dreams were sharply snapped by the ring of his Majesty’s spurs on the polished floor. He had walked to where my Lady was standing.


“ You told the truth at Polenstjerna ? ” he asked, with a marvellously royal dignity.

My Lady met his look with a dignity as noble, and a grace that was all her own. “ Yes, sire,” she said, with a low curtsey.

“ And those papers you knew contained treason ? ”

“ No, sire.” The denial came out clear as a bell on a frosty night. “ No, sire, I did not know. I believed then that they were forgeries, and I believed so till last night. But now I know that they were not forgeries, all save two. My signature was written on those two. That signature was a forgery. As I stand before God and your Majesty, I say I had no part or lot in this matter, else,” my Lady drew herself up and faced the King, “ else I had not dared to-day to remain in your Majesty’s presence.”

“ You know, then—you admit—that your house has been guilty ? ”



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"Yes, sire." Her head dropped. She could not meet the King's look.

I clenched my hands. The full truth was revealed now.

"Fröken"—began the King; it was the first time that his Majesty had addressed her personally; my Lady raised her head, her breath was caught—"Fröken Grefvinna, I ask your pardon."

In the stateliest way he raised her hand and kissed it. It was the most beautiful and touching thing that I have ever seen or shall see.

"I thank you, Grefvinna Polenstjerna," his Majesty repeated, "in the name of Sweden, and of the army—my army—of Sweden for what you have done, and I ask your pardon for what I have done."

My Lady stood pale as death, pale with a pride, a joy, and a sorrow indescribable. All the blood and sweat, all the agony and shame of the two years that were past had been wiped out by this one priceless moment—by the mercy and justice of her king, the King of Sweden.

I could have worshipped him, my master now and for ever.

Once again his Majesty bent over her hand, and then he turned to the Graf.

"You, too, Herr Graf," he said, "I would thank for what you have done. You have spoken the truth. You have asked for justice. It is not in my power to give you that *now*," he paused, "but you shall have it at Dresden when peace is made. I promise it on my honour as a King."

The Graf bowed, once, twice, thrice. The King's eye fell on the broken blade at his feet. He strode up to the Trabants, and took a sword from one of them.

"Take back your sword, Herr Graf," he said, "and use it henceforth for what you ask—justice."

"I will use it as your Majesty commands."

"No," said his Majesty quietly, "not I, but God alone, can direct you aright."

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He had turned slowly ; he was in front of my Lord Bengt.

“ Your house, Herr Grefve,” he said, “ has done great services to my ancestors and to Sweden in the past. Charles of Sweden can never forget it, never ! ” He advanced one step. “ I can undo the wrong that has fallen upon the innocent, I can restore the guiltless, but,” he paused, “ you—you have served in my army, you have twice saved my life—God judge between you and me, Bengt Polenstjerna, I cannot. Go your way, and may God, who knows the hearts of all, send you what you deserve ! ”

My Lord stared at him speechless. Their eyes met ; the King turned his back on him.

“ M. Martin,” said his Majesty, “ you did wrong at Polenstjerna. The truth and the right cannot be won by wrong. You have been punished.” He paused, adding, wearily, “ And now you can put those papers in the fire.”

The vile secrets shrivelled into ashes in an instant, they were gone never to return. No one but myself and his Majesty King Charles XII. knew what utter damnation of an aunt and a cousin had lain written in that third bundle in the despatch case of the Elector of Saxony. At last the bitter harvest had been reaped, the fruits of a man’s and a woman’s ambition.

His Majesty was surveying the salon.

“ What has passed in this room,” he said, in his clearest tones, “ has been a matter of State, and a matter of justice. It is my command that it never be spoken of again. Ladies and gentlemen, I can trust to your honour not to violate the confidence that the King of Sweden has placed in you.”

And yet I have heard men say that King Charles had none of the graces of a king ! Let those who stood in that salon, let those who knew him as we knew him, bear testimony and judge. He was a soldier, and he never forgot it nor allowed anyone to forget it ; of the so-called graces of a court he was and desired to remain free ; but when he willed, he stormed the hearts of men, yes, and of women, too, as he

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stormed a trench, looted and spurred, sword in hand, swift, direct, irresistible. You were at his feet before you knew it was in his mind to conquer you ; and in a moment you were proud to own your defeat. If my poor opinion be worth anything, of all the great men whom I have seen—and of the great men who then filled Europe with their fame I have been permitted to see many—I say, of all these there was but one who could match King Charles of Sweden in a royal sweetness and strength. And that other was a very different man, one whom fortune and the graces had endowed as they have endowed no other living man, but he, too, was a soldier, the greatest in Europe after my master, and of my own nation, I mean my Lord Duke of Marlborough.

The King had paused. He strode up to my Lady.

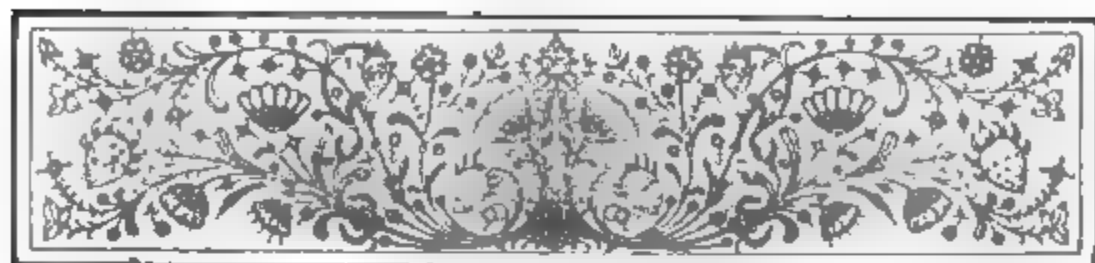
"*Pröken Grefvinna*," he said, with that old-fashioned and grave courtesy, strange in one so young, "I once more ask your pardon."

"Sire," cried my Lady, sobbing, "oh! sire——"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the King, with his simplest dignity, "I bid you good day" ; he bowed to us all in turn, standing there in his soiled blue coat and muddy boots. The Trabants fell back, the great spurs clashed, the doors opened and closed.

We were done with the justice of King Charles XII.





CHAPTER XV

THE SECRET FORD AGAIN

OUTSIDE the trumpets sounded ; the drums were beating. The clang of soldiers moving awoke me—awoke me to the bitter consciousness that my joy in the King's justice had come too soon. Not yet—not yet had we gathered all the fruits of a man's and a woman's ambition.

I stole to the Princess, whose face was buried in her despairing hands.

"Your Highness," I pleaded, in a whisper, "will take my arm?" I appealed with an entreating look to the Graf. But my Lady stopped us.

"Herr Graf," she began, "I, too, have something to say ; I have a promise to keep, and I wish to keep it in the presence of you all."

Ah ! now I knew what was coming. What it cost her to say what she did, it is not for us even to guess.

"At Warsaw," my Lady began, "M. Martin, once my tutor, always my friend, asked me to alter the opinion which I held of you, Herr Graf, asked me to judge you with more charity than—" she choked ; "I could not ; I could not do it then. But I promised that if M. Martin proved to be right, I would beg your pardon. That is what it is now my duty to do. For two years and more I have done you, Herr Graf, a cruel injustice : I cannot undo it, but the least that an unhappy woman can do is to ask your forgiveness, and I ask it."

"Oh! say no more, Madam," implored the Graf; "I cannot permit it. It is I who did the grievous wrong; it is I who should kneel and request you, if I dared, to forgive and forget."

"No, no," my Lady repeated, passionately.

"But it is," persisted the Graf, "it is so. I have been compelled to say and do—" he, too, paused, overcome. "Oh! believe me, I would not have done it could I have laid bare the truth, the truth that was yours, in any other way."

"I thank you," said my Lady. "Would God we had always had the courage to tell the truth as you have told it to-day! And you, Herr Graf, have done much more than tell the truth. Had it not been for you, the King of Sweden would not have been here to thank you, nor would I."

"The truth!" repeated the Graf, bitterly; "it is not I who told the truth. You judged me aright at Warsaw. I did not come from the Königstein to tell the truth. Ask M. Martin, for he knows. It is he, and no one else, who brought me to my duty."

"If," said my Lady, after a minute's silence, "if you would help an unhappy woman to bear her burden, you, Herr Graf, will do what I request"; she held out her hand, and on his knees the Graf gave and received forgiveness.

My Lady turned to Bengt.

"Bengt," she asked in the same quiet voice, "Bengt, have you nothing to say—to me?"

He met the gaze of her yearning eyes without flinching.

"Nothing," he replied proudly.

"It is all true?"

"Yes."

Once more, as it had been eight-and-forty hours before, there were only these two in the room: a man and a woman who had looked so often into each other's souls for comfort and had found it, but were to find it no more.

"You heard," my Lady continued, "what the King

said." She stopped. "Go, go!" She pointed to the door.

His head was as high as her own. "Yes," he answered, "I will go now, but I shall come back."

Then all the passion of a wronged woman leaped into her face and arms.

"You lied to me, Bengt," she said, fiercely, "—to me—to me!"

"Yes," he answered, calmly, "I lied to you, as I would lie again to save your honour and to keep your love."

She was gazing at him with astonishment and indignation. "You say that to me, Bengt?" Her courage failed her. "Oh! go, I beseech you."

"Ebba," was his answer, spoken with a wonderful dignity, "Ebba, you cannot understand now, nor could I tell you, the whole truth. Some day you will both know and understand. This I do say: What I have done I have done, and it was for you, for you——"

"Oh! go—go—" she wailed.

"No, I will not go. You and they all shall hear. I have lied, I have soiled my name, but I do not regret it. I would do it again, and worse, for your sake."

My Lady was smitten, as were all, with the fascination of a great fear.

"Look me in the face, Ebba," he said, "and ask yourself, if I had not done it where you would be now. You were young and innocent; you were caught in a terrible net. Had I not done what I have done, you would have married from duty—duty!—my cousin Karl, poor fool, the gull of the wickedest women in the world, the wantons of Dresden and Warsaw, and you, our countess, my Countess Polenstjerna," he lingered on the words with a marvellous and tender grace, "you, the niece of the Polish woman, my aunt, who made the plot, the wife of the man who was to lead the plot, you to-day would have been the outcast of Sweden, fit only to be what the Elector of Saxony tried to make you; you would

have been the traitress on whom your King and mine would have sought and found justice, as he seeks and will find it on that accursed reed, Pärn. From that fate, thank God ! my love saved you. No, to lie was the only way, and I took it."

He paused, and we shrank back at his look. "I," he pursued, "I, Bengt, your cousin, saved you, saved you by wailing my name and staining my sword. But did it make me forget that I was a Swede and a Polenstjerna ? I have twice saved the life of the King ; I have done my duty against the enemies of Sweden, your enemies, Ebba, and mine. That no man can take from me. Out there—" he flung his arm at the window overlooking the courtyard where the drums were beating, drowning the tramp of feet and of horses' hoofs on the flags, "out there they know ; they know at Copenhagen, at Moscow, and at Warsaw."

His passion had burst like a mighty wave over my Lady and stunned her into silence. He took a step forward, and his voice dropped. "For the past," he said, "and my part in it, I do not ask any man's pardon. There is only one thing that I regret, and that is, that to save your honour, you, our Countess Polenstjerna, I soiled your name, the name of the one woman for whose honour I would face—I have faced—alone, the gates of hell and of death, for you, the daughter of our race. For that, and that alone, Ebba, I ask your forgiveness."

He dropped on his knee and took her listless hand. Was he acting ? was he sincere ? Who can say ? God alone, who made him so strong and so weak, God, whose mercy is infinite, whose eyes are on the truth, alone knew.

"And I ask your forgiveness, because—because I have loved you from the beginning, and shall love you till death parts us."

Her hand lay in his, unresisting. His voice gained strength, and triumph stole into his deep tones. "Your heart is mine, and will be mine to the end."

A faint shiver passed over her. She drew her hand slowly from his.

"Bengt," she whispered, "you have asked my forgiveness—you have it. Go!"

He bowed his head. "I shall come back, Ebba."

"No," and his passion swept from him to her. "No, never!"

He stumbled to his feet. His lips moved. Despair, merciless despair, mastered his face.

"For all that you have done," my Lady said, "for Sweden and our King you have had his thanks, you have mine. That you soiled my name, *that* and much more I can and do freely forgive, for you and I loved each other, trusted each other. But the wrong you have done yourself I cannot forget and God alone can pardon you. You, Bengt, you—I believed your heart was pure as mine was pure."

She was confronting him now. "You have done worse than be guilty towards the King, you have wronged a woman's heart, a woman who trusted you, honoured you, loved you——"

"Yes," he interrupted passionately, "your heart is mine, you cannot deny it."

"That," she replied, with a cruel sob, "that is the most awful of all. You came to me and took my heart; I gave it to you proudly, you were its master; that broken heart is yours, Bengt."

Confusion seized him.

"Ah! had you only been true to yourself, not all the treason, not all the lies, not all the wrongs that you have done to others had taken away my love. I would have forgiven you as a woman must forgive what she herself has caused, and in God's own time, when you had purged yourself and sought repentance with tears, my heart would have come back to you and we would have walked along the road to peace and happiness together, forgiving and forgiven. But," she took his hand, "you lied to me, to me, the

woman; you deceived me, the woman, and I, ah, me ! I believed you, not once, not twice, but a dozen times. You caused me to sin, you let me wreck the lives of others. I never loved you,—you never loved me, and it is you who have taught me that what we thought was love was a thing of clay ; it is dead, dead ! worse than dead, dishonoured. Go ! go ! I beseech you, and leave me ! ”

“ I will purge myself,” he was sobbing now, “ I will seek repentance with tears, if——”

Her look of sorrow was smiting in its scorn. “ No man,” she answered, “ can heal a woman’s heart when he is the man who first stained and who has broken it. Your honour you can recover, your soiled name you can wipe clean ; but not all the world can make me a girl again as I was when love came to me at Polenstjerna and all was fair. Not all the world can give me back my girl’s heart, my girl’s trust. Go,” she pleaded, wearily, “ go and win back your good name ; it is the last thing I ask,—go and leave me now and for ever ! ”

He was kneeling at her feet. She put her hand on his head. “ Go,” she whispered, “ it is all you can do now to ease the burden God has laid upon me.”

Suddenly she snatched her hand away with a cruel cry, a cry of great and exceeding bitterness. “ Why did God make me a woman,” she moaned, “ that I should be this and do this ? Forgive me, Bengt, and go.”

“ Good-bye ! ” he muttered, “ good-bye ! ” He took her two hands and kissed them, and he went out, groping his way as a blind man gropes his way.

Ah ! If I had only had the courage to speak to him in the inn at Warsaw, what could I not have spared him ! what could I not have spared her ! The divine justice was coming on us all now, because we all had sinned. And I, who had thought myself so righteous, was the worst sinner of them all. Not even the wretched man who had put his immortal soul to the hazard, and had now gone forth damned

for ever because he had wrecked a woman's belief in her own womanhood,—not even he had sinned more than I. I had sinned to save her heart from breaking, and it was broken—broken before our eyes.

As the door closed, my Lady knelt down. And we, the Princess, the Graf, and I, stole softly from the salon, leaving her there alone on her knees. In the hall the Graf broke the silence. "Adieu, Madam!" was what he said, "my work is done."

They gazed at each other for the space of two minutes, while neither spoke. I did not desire to divine, nor could I have divined had I desired, what passed through their eyes in that remorseless stillness.

Then the Princess very slowly and quietly turned away and began to climb the great stairs with a kind of proud weariness. Parting between them there was none; no, not so much as the touching of finger-tips, still less of words.

The Graf stood in the hall, his face grey with many sleepless nights and the fights that had set him free, gazing at the stairs up which the Princess climbed step by step with that cruel, proud weariness. At the top she drew breath, turned, supporting herself by one arm on the balustrade, and looked back into the fast-gathering gloom below. The rustle of her robes echoed in a silken murmur down to us. It ceased—the Princess had vanished into the dusk of the gallery.

I was next conscious of the Graf with his hands on my shoulders, looking into my eyes.

"Good-bye, my bookworm," he said; "you and I have seen and done some queer things together. And we have made as good a job of this business as we had any right to expect. You are young, my friend, and I am old, but hang me! if you have n't taught me as much, nay, more than I have taught you. I am proud of you, my pupil and my friend. May you be happy! Good-bye!"

He took my hand between both of his and wrung it.

“ Whither are you going now ? ” I had never seen such determination in his mouth and chin as at this moment.

“ To seek the justice that your King bade me seek.”

“ And when shall we meet again ? ”

He laughed, an awkward laugh of deep and bitter feeling.

“ God knows,” he said, in a forced way; “ perhaps sooner than you think, perhaps never——”

“ Good-bye ! ” he muttered, jamming his hat down tight on his temples, that I might not see the tears in his worn eyes. I could say nothing ; the words would not find utterance.

Across the polished floor clattered his muddy boots; his bloody spurs clinked with jaunty defiance. There floated to me the words of a mocking ditty, sung in a hoarsely gay despair :

“ *Küsse nur ein Jedermann
Wie er weiss, will, soll und kann ;
Ich nur und die Liebste wissen,
Wie wir uns recht sollen küssen !* ”

But once before I had heard that song when we met for the first time in the hall at Polenstjerna, and he had never sung it since till this hour. The pitiless echoes found me staring at the dirty stains of many feet,—a King’s, a Graf’s, the ‘Trabants’, and my Lord Bengt’s,—they had all passed this way going and coming ; and in that salon where peace, *La Paix des Dames*, was to have been made, my Lady was kneeling.

“ *Ich nur und die Liebste wissen,
Wie wir uns recht sollen küssen !* ”

Ah, me ! what seas had rolled between the first singing of that song and the last ! Dear God ! that it should be so ! Then I, too, climbed the stairs wearily and sought a refuge in my chamber. The dusk came slowly on, when suddenly the trumpets began to blow, trumpets blowing far away in

the woods where the Saxon camp had lain. The answering blare from the turrets above my head dragged my shattered body from its racking torpor.

A strange resolution coursed through my blood. "If it be true," I cried, "I will not die, I will live to fight for the truth." I ran to the window in the gallery whence I could see out towards the front. I tore the lattice open and leaned out. It *was* true; they were coming; the Swedish army was coming; it had been summoned, and it was here. Yonder through the woods the Swedes were streaming in a mighty resistless tide: men and horses, footmen and dragoons in their hundreds, toil-worn and travel-worn, but triumphant. Their King had slipped from them, as so often they had lost him; he had been in peril, but they had followed him and they had found him. They had found the King. And see! the Swedish flag was flying over the castle. The King was safe!

Fling open the windows and welcome them! Ah! this was something to see! Look there! those are the Finnish horse, that the Muscovite feared as he feared the wolves of winter, and on their flanks ride the horse of Upland and Södermanland and the Life Dragoons. With them are the cavalry of Westmanland, Wermland and Kalmar, and behind march the foot of Nyland and Småland, and the regiments of the Swedish nobles. File upon file, squadron upon squadron, battalion upon battalion, they are coming, King Charles's Blue Boys, the Blue Boys of Sweden, marching, marching, marching, with tattered pennants, and the bullet-ridden flags that had seen victory at the Düna and Narva, marching in their majesty to the glorious calls of their trumpets and the triumphant tuck of drums.

I sobbed with joy at my lattice; I had been one of them last night,—and I had lost heart. They had come to find and save their King, and they had found and saved me too. There was work to be done. To-morrow to Warsaw! and from Warsaw back to Polenstjerna! We had sought the

truth ; it was ours now, and the truth would go with us. To Warsaw " For God, the Protestant Cause, and Sweden ! "

A shout rent the air, a shout as of roaring waters in full flood, a shout of a nation greeting itself, the victors who conquer or die. The King had appeared, he had mounted, and was riding with his Trabants to meet his army, their King and mine, the King whom I had saved at the bidding of my Lady.

His Majesty had drawn rein, and once more, and yet once more went up that mighty shout, " Long live the King ! God save the King ! " His Majesty had taken off his hat, and was facing them bareheaded and serene. The shout shivered into a sob, the joyous sob of men to whom the King of Sweden was Sweden itself. I wiped my eyes and cheered, too.

The King was shaking the hands of his generals, and they were crying. Enough ! Enough ! I closed the lattice.

I must find the Graf and Bengt. They, too, should go with me to Warsaw " For God, the Protestant Cause, and Sweden. "

I hastened to the stairs. The Princess in her fur cloak was climbing them ; all the pride was gone, only the weariness remained.

" What do you seek ? " she asked.

" The Graf and my Lord Bengt. " My resolve was so fierce that I pushed past her almost roughly.

Something between a laugh and a sob gurgled in her throat.

" The Graf and Bengt ! " She leaned against the balustrade. " You will not find them, " she added, calmly ; " you are too late. "

" What ? " I caught at her arm. Her sleepless eyes rested on mine and sent a shiver through me. There was snow on her robe, snow on her boots, and she, the Princess, had been crying. The trumpets and drums had suddenly ceased. I was cold, and oh ! so tired.

"I will show you," she said, and I followed her down the stairs without a word.

She led the way into the gardens and across the field to that hateful little wood. We were going to the Secret Ford! We had reached the Secret Ford!

"Yes," I said, "I—we—are too late."

There they both were in that grisly clearing on the bank of the river, and below, the stream swirled past between its fringes of bare trees. The Graf and my Lord Bengt! lying dead in the trampled snow, their swords still clasped in the iron grip in which death had come to them, and at my Lord Bengt's throat, stained with his blood, lay my Lady's locket.

A child might have guessed how they came to be there, but no man could say. The Secret Ford alone knew. Yes! there they were: the Graf and my Lord, seeking justice, had met at last, and so far as life on earth may be reckoned, their quarrel was settled for ever.

The Princess knelt down in the snow, and kissed the Graf's forehead. She was saying a prayer, and presently she took a tiny silver crucifix from her breast and laid it on his.

"The one man," she muttered, in a hard, dry voice, "the one man who really loved me, and I never loved him."

Her eyes wandered to the face of her cousin, so stern and yet so peaceful in death.

"You must tell Ebba," she whispered. "I cannot, for I should say wicked things of the dead."

I stooped down and unfastened the locket gently. I had taken it from poor Karl, and it had been stained with his blood, and now I must take it a second time, and a second time its motto, "*Pro Deo! Pro Fide! et Pro Suecia!*" was bathed with the blood of a Polenstjerna—the last of the Counts Polenstjerna. For one happy half-hour it had been mine, *but* it was mine no longer.

It was Greta, not I, who took the locket to my Lady and told her.

We brought them both back for a brief space to the hall, and that night by torchlight, in the presence of his Majesty, his Generals, the Trabants, the Princess, my Lady, and the Swedish flag, we buried them where they had fallen. The Secret Ford had added one more secret to the chronicle which its unresting waters hurried to Eternity.

Next morning Greta fetched me to the salon and left me in the presence of her mistress.

"My friend," my Lady said, "it is my duty to tell you that to-day I return to Polenstjerna. His Majesty is sending me back to Sweden."

I bowed. Back to the Terrace and the gardens and the Hall, back to that Tower of King Eric where already was laid an Ebba Polenstjerna's broken heart! Her aunt was dead, Karl was dead, and now Bengt was dead. Yet what else was there to do? The news, this news for me must come sooner or later,—better now!

"Does the Princess go with you?" I asked at last.

She shook her head. "No, I have tried to persuade her, but she will not go. She stays here."

"It is better so," I said.

"Yes, perhaps it is better so."

My Lady rose and walked to the window, where she looked out wistfully at the gardens. A great thaw hung in the air. Spring was coming, and the flowers were coming, and when she reached Polenstjerna the Terrace would be in its tenderest majesty and freshness. Ah, me! what did it matter now whether the gardens were bleak or fair? What sorrow and wistful yearning spoke in that slender, proud figure in its clinging black! Ah, me! and she, the Grefvinna Polenstjerna, so young,—but twenty-two!

"My friend," she said softly, "you must not call me Countess, not Countess, please—to-day; it reminds me—" she turned to the window with a sob.

And I could not comfort her; I had no right.

“ And you——? ” she began, timidly.

“ I ride with the King to-day,” I replied, quickly, “ to Warsaw.”

“ You ride——” a proud light shot into her sad eyes. She was young for a brief moment, and the sun lit up the salon.

“ His Majesty,” I explained, half proud, half ashamed, “ has given me charge of his private papers. Last night I begged leave to go with him now and henceforth, and he has given me this duty.”

“ You asked—you go with the King? Ah! I am glad—so glad, my friend!”

I dropped on my knee and took her hand.

“ You will forget and forgive,” she began.

“ Do not ask me to forget,” I pleaded; “ it is all I have to make life sweet.”

“ As you will, Hugo,” she answered, still more softly; “ we cannot forget the past. The past for me, is it not all that you have been to me, all that you have done for me? I, too, would not forget.”

The drums began to beat.

“ You will think of me sometimes when you are with the King,” she murmured, “ of me, your friend, Ebba Polenstjerna!” Think of her, my mistress, sometimes, sometimes! But I had pledged myself to silence, and I would not break my word now, when she was alone in the world. “ Good-bye! Hugo, good-bye!” she whispered “ May God bless you, and have you in His keeping always!”

That was all. I could not have wished for more; I had no right to expect even so much, and I rode proud and happy with the King, out into the new world that was opening before me along the miry roads—to Warsaw.





CHAPTER XVI

THE TRUMPETS OF ALTRÄNSTÄDT

THE kettle-drums beat to evening prayers. As I descended to worship in the little chapel of Schloss Altränstädt I reflected that it was the month of August in the year of grace seventeen hundred and seven, and that we had been here eleven months, and his Majesty gave no sign that he had any intention of ever taking the field again. I was also reflecting that I was horribly hungry. It was a fast-day, and whatever others might do secretly and in great fear, it was impossible for those in personal attendance on his Majesty to get anything to eat until the drums had throbbed out that prayers were over and the fast ended. Five years had passed since I had taken leave of my Lady at the castle of the Princess Rapirska,—a five years as full as fifty, and I had grown accustomed to many, nay, most things, but the one thing to which I could never accustom myself were these fast-days, when one worked on, or rode on, or dawdled on with an empty stomach from dawn till set of sun. It was easy, so easy, for the King ; everything was easy to him—to go without food, without sleep, to endure the frosts of Poland or the dog-days of Leipzig, pain or starvation—but to us, his servants, made of poorer clay, it was cruelly hard. Yet we Swedes never dreamed of disobeying.

His Majesty's chaplain gave out his text : " He hath filled the hungry with good things ; and the rich he hath sent empty away."

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But I could not listen to the brief exposition which followed : the mocking words simply droned round and round in my head. As I came away a horn in the village sounded clear above the drums, the welcome drums telling us that the fast was finished. "Someone," said one of the Trabants, listlessly, for he, too, was hungry, "someone has arrived."

"I suppose so," I muttered. But I confess I thought only of my supper. Someone was always arriving at Altränstädt ; one day it was the Envoy from the King of France, the next from his Cæsarian Majesty at Vienna or the High Allies at The Hague, or more rarely from my Sovereign Lady, Anne, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland ; or it was a princess with a daughter, who refused to believe that for the daughters of princesses his Majesty did not care one rap ; or it was a great lady who desired to accomplish a little affair of her own, and who imagined that our Swedish Schloss Altränstädt was as other schlosses where Majesty holds sway, and was mightily huffed when the King peremptorily refused so much as to look at her ; still more often it was a bewhiskered soldier, offering of his bounty to put a cut-throat sword and an experience of all the camps of Europe at our disposal, for whom generally one week of Swedish discipline and Swedish fare was enough to send packing in a whirlwind of oaths. Yes, Schloss Altränstädt was a curious place—the world said so, and the world was right.

The quality we always had with us in swarms, a quality which plagued my life and thronged the dining-salon at midday to catch a glimpse of this weird, silent King who galloped through his dinner in five-and-twenty minutes and left the remainder for his Trabants to fall on. The horn in the village kept blowing ; but when you have been surfeited with envoys and ambassadors, from the godlike Victor of Blenheim and Ramillies and Marshal Villars to the pettiest secretary of the pettiest German princeling, new arrivals only meant that his Majesty in a fit of perversity would

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drag you from your bed in the middle of the night to inspect the new recruits perhaps twenty miles away.

So I ate my supper with royal haste, for we were attending the King to the wedding supper of one of the troopers in the Life Guards.

And what a frolicsome humour he was in, to be sure ! Women of quality only frightened him as he frightened them (Madam Robinson, I believe, the good lady of the reverend gentleman who represented my country at the Court, was the only woman to whom he had been known to talk of his own will for a half-hour, to her terror and the joy of her master), but a trooper's sweetheart nearly always set him romping like a schoolboy. Had you only seen the King, cold, haughty, silent, stalking about in his blue coat and clanking boots at the wedding fête of the sister of the Herr State Secretary and Grefve Piper, amidst the great ladies in their gala hoops and the gentlemen in their most gorgeous attire, you would have opened your eyes to behold him now in that little cottage playing blindman's-buff or hunt-the-slipper, drinking healths in *brännvinn* ; and had somebody dared to suggest that he should pull off the bride's garter, why, I believe he would have done it. But do not imagine that he forgot his royal dignity in these pranks ; not the youngest and maddest trooper, with his head dizzy with toasts, ever forgot, or would be permitted to forget, that the King was the King. At a word, a nod, we had been in the saddle, fit to charge, as the world knows, the Swedish horse charge. Majesty was in our midst, though it was Majesty in a blue coat and boots as we were ; and because the King was the King we could dance and sing till the rafters rang ; it was because we feared and adored him, because he was to us " God, the Protestant Cause, and Sweden."

It was midnight before we returned home. The little page who should have brought the King's candle to his room had fallen asleep in the gallery, the royal candle drip-

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ping upon his fresh cheeks and dimpled arm, whereupon one of the Trabants was on the point of roughly waking the lad.

“Let him sleep,” said the King, in his quick way ; “the lad will have enough sleepless nights before long.”

He swung off his cloak and dropped it on the boy's motionless body, took the candle, and vanished into his chamber. We heard him fling himself upon his knees, then rise and blow out the candle. The King was asleep. As so often, his Majesty had said his prayers, but had forgotten to take off his boots.

“Something is afoot,” muttered the Trabant, staring at the sleeping page in the King's cloak. But we had said that so often during these eleven months, and we were still here, doing nothing but train recruits and drill from morning till night, as if Altränstädt was to be the King's home for ever and the Czar had not taken a single precious Swedish town on the Baltic.

When the trumpets woke me next morning, the little page was by my bedside. His Majesty would see me—which meant at once.

Of a morning, indeed all day, the King, when indoors, sat in the cabinet off the salon of audience where he had received his Grace of Marlborough—“Monsieur Jacques Churchill”—when he brought that letter from the Sovereign Lady, Queen Anne, on the visit with which all Europe rang. To that cabinet they had retired with Mr. Robinson for a conference of two hours which had made the chanceries from St. James's, to Vienna agog with excitement—a bare room covered with maps of Muscovy (as, Mr. Robinson told me, his Grace of Marlborough's suave and passionless eyes had quickly noted). Often indeed had I waited on the King in that room, and he was always poring, in an arctic silence, over the maps of Muscovy, or reading in his Bible, which never left him, and this morning Field Marshal Rehnskjöld was already here, standing on the other side of the table,

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talking earnestly in a low voice, and between them lay two or three great maps, marked, but not by the King.

The Field Marshal's voice dropped as I entered. The King stared at the map, out of the window, at the map again.

"Do you know who arrived last night?" his Majesty demanded.

"No, sire."

"I expect," said the King to the wall through my body, "my secretary to know everything which happens in Altränstädt."

He scrawled a few words on a sheet of paper, in that boyish, illegible hand which gave others and myself so much trouble, and sealed the writing in a cover. Then he put his hand on my shoulder (it was his Majesty's way when speaking to his confidential servants). "You will take this," he said, "at seven o'clock to the Fröken Grefvinna Polenstjerna."

"Am I to go to Sweden, sire?" I inquired, with the brevity loved by my master.

A twinkle stole into the blue eyes. "It is not necessary. The Fröken Grefvinna is here." My hat fell from under my arm. My Lady here in Altränstädt!

"The Fröken Grefvinna," said the King, staring at the map, "is here to ask the consent of the Crown of Sweden to her marriage."

The blood boomed in my ears. The King let his hand drop. I was dismissed.

My Lady here in Altränstädt! Here, but where? I went back. His Majesty looked up freezingly. I had interrupted the Field Marshal's daily report on the condition of the troops.

I explained my difficulty. "I do not know either," said the King briefly, and turned to his general.

The kettle-drums throbbed out five o'clock, the hour for morning prayers, and I dared not be absent. But attendance at prayers with my Lady at Altränstädt was more cruel than

attendance in the evening of one of those never-ending fast-days.

I sat down in the courtyard and watched the soldiers drilling in the gay August sunshine, sick and sorrowful. Pah ! my Lady was here to ask the King's consent for her marriage—here in Altränstädt !

Five years of toil, hardship, silence, and endurance lay behind me. Fool that I was to think, to hope that if I worked and fought my Lady might—might—might at last take pity ! Fool that I was to forget that a woman's heart cannot be won by service, not even such service as God and the King had laid upon me ! Ah ! I had been so near death a hundred times in those five years : at Klissow, where I was at the King's elbow when we routed the Saxon horse and stole the supper which they had left in a hurry to beat us ; at Thorn, in the trenches, when the earth from the bursting bomb had sent the King and myself head over heels among the sappers burrowing at our feet ; in the marshes of the Minsk, when the King and the little boy Prince of Würtemberg, "*Den lilla Prinzen*" as the King called him, had swum the river in the face of the Muscovites ; and that most glorious day at Pultusk, when we chased the enemy like sheep before us through the village. Yes, I had been at them all,—all these heroic encounters, wonderful as the achievements of a Crusader's romance,—till we had calmly broken over the border of Silesia and, to the consternation of Europe, had begun that relentless march into the Empire which had only stopped at Schloss Altränstädt. Victory and vengeance had been ours. Had I not seen the perjured Elector of Saxony, Augustus the Strong, who had flung me into the Königstein, lay down his Polish crown at my master's bidding ? Had not the Princess's words come true, and was not Patkul now awaiting the awful justice of my King ? And now we had peace. To some, as to the Princess and Kätchen, death had come in those five years as a happy release ; to others, thrice and four times happy, Polish steel and

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Saxon bullets or the Muscovite spear had brought fame, and their bones now rested gloriously in the Polish plains, "For God, the Protestant Cause, and Sweden"; for me alone there was no release and no fame.

The trumpets proclaimed seven o'clock. I must go. It was two years since I had heard of my Lady; thrice before letters had come, and then silence. I had often wondered; it was not for me to complain, but now I knew the reason.

I was rapping at the door of the little house where I was told the Grefvinna lay, and, bless me! here was Greta, plumper and more matronly than I could have imagined, but as pretty as ever, though she was staring crossly at this unwelcome intruder.

No, I could not see the Fröken Grefvinna, she said, sharply; the Fröken Grefvinna was dressing. The door closed in my face on a gleam of gold. Bah! a wedding ring! Greta was married, of course! I laughed. Jack-pudding that I was! How could Greta recognise me, when she had never seen me, M. Martin, in a blue coat and boots, and a skin tanned by Polish frosts and German suns as brown as mahogany; M. Martin, a great, coarse soldier, who had once read Plato and taught Mr. Locke to a maid under the linden tree by the fountains at Polenstjerna. "Greta," I said, and she started indignantly, "have you, too, forgotten M. Martin?"

She stared, uttered a choking cry, dropped on her knees in an astonished effort to curtsy, and was away up the stairs half crying, half laughing, as she poured out incoherent Swedish. I was on the King's business, so I walked into the parlour and waited.

And then there floated in my Lady, the proud, virginal, dainty young Countess with the salt breeze of the Baltic in her cool cheeks. God! I, the rough soldier, had forgotten what a divine fragrance and tenderness may be wafted by a woman's presence, by the one woman in the world for me—and someone else, confound his noble blood!

I gave her the King's message, and as she read it I watched her as the sylvan satyr may watch, moonstruck, Dian's self. My promise at Warsaw ! No need to recall it, no ; how could I ever have dared to presume as I had ?

" You were wounded twice," she said, shyly, after we had talked of many things. " You must know we hear of everything, in time, at Polenstjerna. You have forgotten Axel, have you not ? "

Axel, of course ! He had been at my side in that last mad charge of the Polenstjerna horse at Pultusk, where he had lost his right arm, and had been sent home useless, except to become Greta's husband. Axel was a blabbing idiot !

" It was nothing," I said, staring at the rushes on the floor.

" Friherre Martin," whispered my Lady, wickedly, " we are very much afraid of you,"—the corners of her mouth twitched. She was laughing at me.

It was true that the King for my poor services had been pleased to make me a Friherre of Sweden, but—I rose. " What answer shall I take to his Majesty ? " I demanded, coldly.

" Can his Majesty's secretary, Friherre Martin, wait ? " she rejoined, demurely.

I bowed stiffly. It was too cruel of a noble to sneer at the yeoman born who the King had said should be yeoman no longer.

I had to wait at least twenty minutes, while Greta's tongue overhead, amid peals of laughter, whirled like the sails of a windmill in a strong breeze.

And then I was permitted to escort my Lady to the Schloss. She was as blithe as on the May days before the tragedy had begun at Polenstjerna, and it made me ferocious. Had she really forgotten Karl and Bengt and King Eric's Tower ? I suppose so. Women who are going to be married can forget these things.

" You will wait to conduct the Fröken Grefvinna back,"

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his Majesty said, curtly, and I left her closeted with him in his cabinet, both of them as scared as a king and a lady of quality can be.

While I kicked my heels for two hours, I reflected with malicious pleasure that Mr. Secretary to the Cabinet, Cederhjelm, the Counsellor to the Chancery, Count Hermelin, and an Envoy from Versailles and two generals were all fuming to see the King. I told them gleefully that his Majesty was shut up with a woman, and I learned later that the Envoy sent off an express which made his masters believe that King Charles was really mad—or about to marry, himself.

There was no jesting on the way back from the castle, You do not jest when you have been shut up with the King my master, for two hours.

We went into the little parlour. "To-morrow," she said, bluntly, "I return to Polenstjerna."

"To-morrow!" Well, the sooner the better!

"And it is the King's wish," she lingered on the word, "that you should escort me home." Could it be that she was smiling?

"You do not desire to go back to Polenstjerna?" she asked, quickly.

"I do not understand, Madam. Is it his Majesty's wish or his command?"

"No, wish—wish. Please do not come unless you want to come."

Now what could a man say to that?

She turned again to the window, drumming on the sill. Then she settled the ribbons on her bodice composedly. "And you will not come to Polenstjerna?" she asked, quietly.

Her eyes fell before my indignant look. "I cannot leave the King," I answered, coldly.

"Not even if—I ask you?" She threw up her chin.

"For God's sake, do not torture me further!" I burst out.

“ I cannot take you to Polenstjerna, and you—Ebba— Let me go,” I implored.

“ No, I will not. I have something to say and you have driven me to say it, because—because—no, I cannot say it. Hugo !” she held out both her hands, “ why are you so cruel and so blind ? Is it because you have forgotten and do not——”

“ Ebba !” I was kneeling at her feet. “ Ebba ! release me from my promise——”

“ Your promise !” she repeated dully, and then a gay sob shook her voice. “ Your promise—that—ah !” She was carolling now with the saddest, happiest laughter.

I was kissing her fingers in a whirlwind of remorse.

“ It was so lonely there,” she sobbed upon my shoulder, “ so lonely, and it was so full of you every where, and I had no one who cared, and—and—Hugo, do not let me go back to Polenstjerna alone !”

“ And you came all the way from Sweden to——”

“ What could I do ? The King was here, and you would not write, and—Hugo, does not Friherre Martin see *all* the King’s letters ?” she added, slyly.

“ What ! you wrote and asked——”

“ For shame, Hugo, for shame !”

Then I took her so that I, too, could whisper. “ Nay, I must say it. Ah ! sweetheart, you have taught me so much, and now you have taught me the best and greatest lesson of all, that no man is worthy to ask for a woman’s heart. That can only come as a free gift from herself. Pray God I may learn how to deserve it and keep it to the end.”

Greta came pushing her way in with a bottle of wine and glasses. A crash, bottle and glasses rolled on the floor, and we both heard the heels of her slippers clattering away that she might be the first to tell Axel of what she had seen in that little parlour.

That day, for the first time, I forgot my duty, and the envoys, and the King. For the first time the kettle-drums

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beat to evening prayers and my seat was empty. And when I returned at eight o'clock I feared neither King nor pauper. It was August the twenty-first, as I had more than one reason to remember.

"His Majesty has twice asked for you, Friherre Martin," said the little page in an awestricken voice. I should surely be brought before a court-martial to-morrow and dismissed.

I patted his head, smiling, and sought his Majesty in his cabinet, where I found him gazing vacantly at his boots. The maps had disappeared; only the Bible was open as usual on the table by the King's bedhead.

"I understand, sire," I said, "that your Majesty has from this morning dispensed with my services?"

His Majesty nodded. He rose and put his hand on my shoulder. "We take the field to-morrow," he said, quietly. "The troops will concentrate at Steinau."

Ah! I could have thrown up my hat. The Envoy from Versailles had come too late. Steinau! We were to march to Poland and Muscovy, we,—a pang went through me,—no, they, for I was not going with them.

"Let the Field Marshal be summoned," said his Majesty. I stared.

"You, Friherre Martin, are the first to know. Till the Field Marshal is here, not a word."

The little page was staring at me as I tottered into the corridor. I had been dismissed and he began to cry.

"Run," I said, with an effort, "to the Field Marshal and tell him the King would see him at once. Run for your life!"

One frightened glance, and he had guessed what it meant; for the trumpets were in my voice, the trumpets of a Swedish charge. Poor child! he would have enough sleepless nights now—for the King's face had Moscow and the Czar written on it. At last! At last the hour for which we in the Swedish army had been praying through five weary years had come—the hour for the day of reckoning with the Czar

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Yes, thank God ! it had come at last, and, as always with the King my master, like a thief in the night.

The next morning, August the twenty-second, seventeen hundred and seven, Ebba and I, standing in the windows of Schloss Altränstädt, saw the King depart. The news had spread like wildfire, and a small crowd of the peasants and country folk, dashed with a half-dozen of the curious quality, had gathered to witness his leaving.

The trumpets rang, and the kettle-drums beat as the Life Guards and the Trabants formed up.

“ Ah ! ” cried my Lady, “ see ! there is the King, my—our King, Hugo ! ”

And so it was, the King with such of his marshals and generals as were here and the immortal Trabants, the flower of that wonderful army which was now marching on Steinau to meet the King of Sweden. To the gaping crowd below that army meant but one man, the man who had wrung the rights of downtrodden Protestants from Cæsarian majesty at Vienna, who had hung a soldier for stealing an old woman's fowl, a King who went twice daily to prayers and fasted. Yet as he rode at the head of his Trabants he might have been the humblest trooper of all the squadrons. Down there many of them were kneeling, those Saxon burghers and peasants, who remembered that once before a Swedish King had appeared in their midst, the Lion of the Protestant Faith, mighty to save. They stared in stony silence. The chill, numbing awe which froze the air where the King moved had gripped them ; they were dumb before this boy King with the mysterious, inscrutable, star-like eyes, the King with Moscow and the Czar in his face. A cheer—that told us the King had passed, and men could breathe again. But he had not passed without acknowledging my salute and my Lady's deepest reverence, and it sent a thrill through us. The sun came out and flooded Schloss Altränstädt and the far-off towers of Leipzig with its royal glory.



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"Thank God!" my Lady whispered, "I am a Swede. May God, Hugo, keep me worthy, as I am proud, to be a Swedish woman!"

Her hand stole into mine, her cheek rested against my shoulder, her eyes looked up into mine, as I had never hoped, never dreamed they would. The King was leaving Schloss Altänstädt, where Gustavus Adolphus had slept the night before Lützen, and his Majesty's words came back to me, the words spoken the day that he had ridden over that immortal field. "We have always striven," he said, as he halted by the spot where the King of Sweden had fallen, "to live as King Gustavus Adolphus lived. May God of His goodness grant to us, too, a death such as his!"

We stood, my Lady and I, gazing. God had indeed been very good to me. The troops had passed, but the trumpets continued to blow. Above the beating surge of the drums and the clang of the church bells we could hear them fiercely, proudly, joyously calling, calling, calling, calling through the royal August sunlight as they had so often called, and never in vain, over the plains of Poland, and they would call till they were answered by the trumpets of the host that awaited the King at Steinau. We listened with beating hearts. The room where we stood grew dark, the sun was blotted out, the wind came sweeping from the fields of Lützen. My Lady and I held our breath in an awful fear, for a most wonderful thing had happened. The air had suddenly grown thick with mysterious, mighty, ghostly presences. The King was riding away—we could see him and his Trabants, and he was riding no longer alone. Behind Charles XII. there now rode in an unending procession the kings of Sweden—Charles XI. and Charles X., King Eric and King John and Gustavus Vasa, and last, the greatest of them all, Gustavus Adolphus with his marshals, the victorious ancestors of those victorious men whom we had seen in the flesh to-day, and around them streamed the pennons and banners which had floated in victory here

at Altränstädt and Lützen and a hundred stricken fields. Before our eyes was unrolled the Titanic epic of Swedish history, unrolled by those hoarse, imperious notes now reverberating down the wind. Mere trumpet-calls! Ah, yes! but in our ears they were mingled with other trumpets, not blown by human hands and mouths. Were they not the Swedish trumpets which had called my Lady's forefathers, the Swedish noble and his peasants, from the ice-bound North to fight at Breitenfeld, Lützen, Warsaw, Lund, Narva, Klissow, Fraustadt, "For God, the Protestant Faith, and Sweden!"? Yes, those trumpets of ours, which had blown where the winds sweep over the marshes and rivers of Poland, and had heralded our march to make peace here on German soil by trampling on the foe of Sweden, had awaked the dead, for they were the trumpets which had summoned the Vasa kings into life, and with them the Swedish nation. So let them blow now as then, the trumpets of the deathless spirits of the past that could never be forgotten while there are Swedes with ears to hear and with hearts to obey; let them blow with their bidding to the unquenchable spirits of the present to march forward, ever forward, trusting, not in their sharp swords, but in their King and in Jehovah, Lord God of battles, the God of Sweden. Aye! let them blow the eternal message of comfort, of trust, of faith, of duty from the past to the present, from the present to the future, the message of duty to the King and of faith in the God of Sweden.

The notes were dying, dying, dying; fainter and fainter they blew till they closed in one shivering but defiant and triumphant challenge. My Lady turned away with a sob, and began to shut the window.

"A year," I heard her whisper, "a year, and then we shall have peace."

For answer rang through the room one last clarion call, unearthly clear, as if sounded by the archangel at the judgment seat of God. My Lady listened, pale to the lips, but

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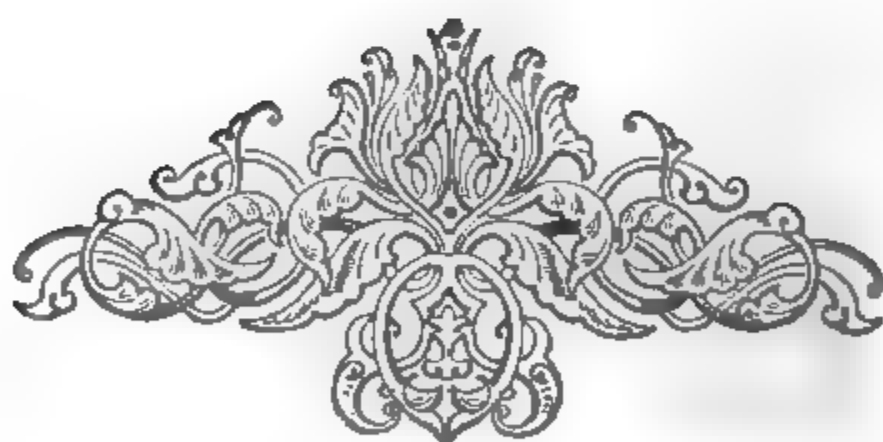
her dear eyes glowed with the sublime vision which still floated through the sunlit room.

A long silence. We could hear no more.

"That was 'adieu,' " she said, quietly, "'adieu.' It is all over, now, yes, all over."

Ah, God ! how could we ever forget those words ? Ah, God ! how little did we guess, my Lady and I, in our supreme happiness, as we walked hand in hand on the Terrace at Polenstjerna, and the autumn roses flung their scents to the salt of the east wind of the Baltic, we who looked out across the moonlit seas for the news that the east wind would bring us,—how little did we know that that last clarion call, those ghostly trumpets, had pealed the knell of an heroic people,—were the summons from God and the Vasa kings, calling an invincible Swedish host to the prison or the grave at Pultawa !

THE END





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